

LEAH CONOLLY



BROKEN DUKES
AND
CHARMING LADIES

A REBELLIOUS LADY FOR THE
BROKENHEARTED DUKE

1

PRETTY LITTLE LIES FOR THE DUKES HEART

2

THE MYSTERY OF THE BROKEN DUKE

3

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About Leah Conolly

Leah, or Leou as her friends call her is a South Dakota native. She describes herself as an affordable psychiatrist since she started reading books out of curiosity for the deeper exploration of the subconscious.

She later studied psychology and criminology in NY, but she returned to her hometown when the family business was at risk of closing.

Ten years later, she writes books to capture the feelings of every major life event she encountered so far. Thankfully, her

romantic nature considers everything to be important resulting in immense writing activity! In her spare time, she provides online counseling for free to women in need. She considers her marriage to be a great adventure and as her husband recalls “every time we argue she comes back later with a new book based on our disagreements set in a different century!”

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Prologue

Lord Charles Blackwood, Earl of Chester, felt an overwhelming sense of relief as his carriage pulled up to his estate. He stepped out onto the gravel and took a moment to admire his home. The sight was welcome—as was the milder weather—after the long trip to the north. Charles stretched out his legs and strolled into the house where all was silent and dark. Only a few candles had been lit to welcome him home, and there were just three servants to unload his luggage and see to his needs.

Immediately, Charles walked towards his study with a servant in tow. As he tried to quiet his footsteps so as not to disturb the rest of the house, he attempted to put his business in Scotland behind him and relax. All that debating and letter writing still rolled around in his head.

Charles sighed as he entered the study. The servant went to the fireplace and soon had a large fire blazing in the hearth. Once he was finished, Charles asked him to bring in a glass

of wine, then settled down into his favorite chair. He needed a good, long rest.

The glass of wine was delivered a few minutes later, and Charles immediately dismissed the servant. He swirled the drink around, watching the deep crimson color with interest, as his mind and body finally began to relax.

He took a sip of the wine and savored the taste. It was his favorite, something he'd been keeping for himself for an occasion such as

this. No need to waste fine wines on parties when you could enjoy them undisturbed.

As he continued to sip on his wine, his eyelids grew heavy. The fire crackled, its warmth radiating into Charles' bones. He stayed awake to finish his glass, but as soon as it was empty, he slipped into unconsciousness.

* * *

The next morning, Charles was found dead in his chair, the embers of the fire still smoking, and the glass beside him empty. It was quickly deduced that the cause of death

was heart failure.

But there was one who knew very well
that heart failure was not the true diagnosis...

Chapter 1

“Elizabeth, have your senses left you entirely?”

Elizabeth Gladstone continued her march through the house even as she heard her father’s footsteps echoing directly behind her. Despite his presence, she was determined to put as much space between her and the parlor as possible. “I have my senses completely about me, Father,” she replied. “It was my senses that told me just how distasteful, vulgar, and rude the Duke was.”

There was a beat of silence that Elizabeth expected. She could well picture her father's expression; the way his gray brows would furrow, his green eyes would darken to emerald, and his lips would pucker into an exaggerated frown. When he eventually spoke, exasperation was evident in his voice. "Child, a duke!"

"Yes, and it is only because he is a duke that I refrained from saying anything more. Comparing him to a raisin was the kindest

compliment I could have bestowed upon him.”

What she would not tell her father was that she only just stopped herself from slapping the duke after he had privately uttered an improper comment on her appearance. Because he was a duke, he could get away with it. If one had a title, one was entitled to anything, it seemed, but it did not mean Elizabeth had to put up with it.

Elizabeth came to the end of her march when she entered the library at the extreme opposite end of the house. She turned to face

her father with her arms crossed over her chest.

Her father's expression was that of a storm waiting to erupt but interspersed with the anger was also confusion and exasperation, as if, even after all these years, he still did not understand his daughter. "Please," he pleaded, "just return to the duke and apologize."

"Why would I tell the duke I am sorry when I am not? That is nonsensical."

A tinge of red crept into her father's cheeks, and his hands shook at his sides. "You are nonsensical, child!" His voice reached a crescendo, as he gestured to her dress. "Your appearance is not even presentable! You knew he was coming, and yet you entered with your dress dirty and your hair a mess. You are not fit to be seen by anyone in such a state!"

Elizabeth followed her father's gaze and looked down at the hem of her dress, which was splattered with mud from her morning

walk. Her long blonde hair trailed halfway in front of her shoulder and halfway behind, running all the way down her back. Why should it matter if the duke knew she had been out walking? She would not change out of a perfectly good dress just because it had been used for its intended purpose.

Elizabeth's resolve only hardened at her father's disapproval. "I am not a child, Father, and I will not apologize for being honest!"

He ran his hands through his hair and

clenched his jaw. After a few seconds, he breathed out a long sigh. “Elizabeth,” he began in a gentler tone, “I have not hidden from you that my estate is near ruin. If you do not marry...” He shook his head, sorrow in his eyes. “I fear what will happen to you.”

Some of Elizabeth’s anger ebbed at the sight of her father’s anxiety. “I understand, Father, but I will not marry someone like *him*,” she said, gesturing toward the sitting room. “I want a man to marry me for who I am, not who I pretend to be.”

Her father's frown deepened. "Then you must become a lady. Now, all you are is a child."

Elizabeth glared at him, but, as she had no more to say, she stormed off, walking straight past her father and making her way outside. She knew that nature was the only thing that would not criticize her in all of this, and, since her father had taken such a dislike to her appearance, she decided she would take care to make it even more unladylike as she

walked through the muddiest patches of ground.

Determined to put distance between herself and the house, Elizabeth made for the fields that were more familiar to her than the father who was her only family. Out among the rolling hills of grass, she recognized every tree, every flower, and every bird. They were her only friends and confidants. Who else would dare interact with the infamous Elizabeth Gladstone who spoke her mind and did not care what people thought?

Elizabeth's spirits sank as she continued her walk. Despite her show of bravado, she admitted to herself that she was lonely. Her father could hardly be called a parent, as he had never shown her anything like love since her mother had died. She had no other family close by, and the only friend she'd ever had, Felicia, had moved to London only a short time ago. Elizabeth felt the loss of her companionship every day.

As the sun began to set, Elizabeth made

her way back to the house. She did not encounter her father and refused to join him for dinner. Instead, she went to bed early. She wanted to cry, but she wouldn't let herself. If she were to be lonely, she would not let anyone else know of her weakness.

* * *

Several mornings later, Elizabeth joined her father for breakfast. All was silent, as had the last few meals they had eaten together. Elizabeth could feel the uneasiness of the servants as they stood ready to serve. She wondered, briefly, what they really thought of

her.

Almost the whole of breakfast passed without a word being spoken. As Elizabeth's father finished, he sat back in his chair, cleared his throat, and finally met Elizabeth's eyes.

“My dear Elizabeth,” he began.

Elizabeth froze. The endearment was always a sign of something terrible to come. She remembered him using it when her

mother had died.

“In light of your recent behavior,” he continued, “I decided to write to your godmother Mrs. Kinsley. This morning I received her reply.”

Elizabeth set down her teacup. “What did you write to her about, Father?”

His gaze shifted away from her, as if he couldn’t bear to directly deliver the punishment. “You are going to live with her in

London. Mrs. Kinsley agreed that you must adapt to the customs of fashionable society. She is an agreeable woman, and she will house you and teach you.”

Elizabeth dropped her fork onto her plate with a clatter that broke the moment of silence. “Live in London? Father, I have hardly been a few miles away from Deuney Keep my whole life!”

Edward Gladstone’s face remained free of emotion.

“Elizabeth, this is long overdue. You have needed a guardian like Mrs. Kinsley for some time, but your unforgivable behavior toward the Duke forced my hand. It is all settled. You will be leaving in a fortnight.”

Elizabeth’s eyes stung with tears. Her father had always been distant, but this was the ultimate betrayal. “Father,” she whispered, “how could you do this?”

His gaze softened, and his expression

transformed into a troubled frown. “You gave me no choice, child. I want the very best for you. If you continue as you are, no man will ever see fit to marry you.”

Elizabeth balled her hands into fists. “I would rather end up an old maid than marry some rich, pompous man who is only pleased with me for my beauty and your title!” She shot to her feet and left the room immediately, running straight upstairs to fall on her bed. She cried until she soaked her pillow through. Her father knocked on her door and called to

her, but she ignored him.

Eventually, Elizabeth began to reason with herself. Her tears dried, as she focused on the positive parts of her situation. Her father could have sent her somewhere worse, like a nunnery, and really, it was a wonder that he hadn't. And though she was grieved to be leaving home, at least it would get her away from her overbearing father.

Elizabeth brightened considerably when it occurred to her that she would see Felicia

again in London. If nothing else, at least there
was one happy circumstance to come out of
this exile

Chapter 2

James awoke to sunlight streaming in through the window. Already, he could hear the sounds of city dwellers beginning their day. Horses' hooves clopped along the street, and voices called out to each other in greeting and confrontation. James stretched, feeling acutely the absence of somebody beside him.

Once he was dressed and had taken care of some early daily duties, James went to the drawing room where he saw that his mother had already started breakfast. "Good morning,

Mother,” he greeted her, bending over to kiss her cheek.

“Good morning.” She waited until he was seated across from her to continue the conversation. “I wanted to wait for you, but Oscar woke early this morning and claimed he was so hungry that he could eat one of your books.”

James chuckled. “I assume he ate rather quickly?”

“I attempted to slow him down, but he ate a few cakes and ran off with poor Miss Ludwig chasing after him.”

James took a cake himself and smiled at the story. “He has his mother’s spirit.”

Mrs. Wordsworth nodded. “He has yours, too. Miss Ludwig tells me that he is quite serious when setting up his toys, just as you were.”

On cue, a little boy with a mop of curly

brown hair darted into the dining room, followed closely by his governess. A wide grin broke out on his face when he saw James.

“Father!” he exclaimed. He ran up to his chair, his eyes shining with excitement. “May I have another seed cake?”

James met Miss Ludwig’s eyes. “He has already eaten three this morning, sir,” she informed him.

“Is this true?” James asked, looking

Oscar in the eye.

Oscar's eyes focused on the ground. "Yes ... but I am still hungry."

James held his chin in his hand, made an exaggerated thinking face, and hummed in thought. "Perhaps, if you can show me how to eat like a gentleman, you will be allowed another cake."

Oscar's eyes widened. He clambered up into the empty chair at the breakfast table,

solemnly picked up his knife and fork, and lifted a seedcake onto his plate. He cut a small piece from it and ate it, intent on his own progress. Once he swallowed, he looked up at James for approval.

“Well done, sir,” James said with a smile. “I expect you to finish the rest of the cake in the same manner.”

Oscar nodded and eagerly went to his task, carefully cutting off bite-sized pieces and consuming the cake. James nodded

approvingly once he was done. Miss Ludwig took Oscar and left James and his grandmother to their breakfast.

“Ah, it is Wednesday!” Mrs. Wordsworth said suddenly. “I know you enjoy your visits with Isabelle, but you must invite her to come *here* for tea sometime. It has been many weeks since I have seen her!”

“I will be sure to tell her.” James looked out the window and noted that clouds were gathering in the distance. “It seems like there

will be rain later, which will make for a rather unpleasant journey,” he noted with a sigh. At least he knew the rough carriage ride would be worth it. Isabelle, his closest friend, always knew just how to cheer him up.

James excused himself from breakfast and went about his day, watching the dark clouds collect over London. Just before he left for Isabelle’s house, the rain came pouring down.

As the carriage rocked back and forth in

an uneven rhythm, James looked out onto the streets of London. There were few people about in the rain, and those who were walking along the street were in an obvious rush.

James was thankful that the inside of his carriage was warm and dry. The gentle sound of the rain on the roof even made seem it peaceful.

Rainy days always made him think of Braith. Contrary to everyone else's complaints about bad weather, she had always loved the rain. It brought life to the Earth, she had said,

so why should it not bring life to people too?

It had been raining the day she died, as if God had sent it just for her. The gentle drizzle, just like today's, had seemed peaceful and melancholy, almost as if the world had stopped turning. Braith had turned her head towards the window and smiled. Her last smile.

James' eyes stung as he dwelled on the memory. He turned his mind instead to his son Oscar who loved to play in the rain. The small

droplets falling on his face made him smile
and laugh like nothing else.

Yet those thoughts turned melancholy,
too. Just when he had needed someone to help
him be a father, his own father, the Duke of
Darrington, had died, leaving his estate and
title to James. Though it had been eight years
ago, the wound was still fresh. James would
give up his title in a heartbeat to have his
father back.

The streets of London ran on, seemingly

never-ending. James wondered why everything else had to end. Though he had his mother, his constant friend and confidante, James couldn't help but admit that he was lonely.

The carriage slowed and then stopped in front of a large house on one of the most fashionable streets in London. A servant opened the carriage door, and James shivered as the cold rain fell on his cheeks. He knocked on the door and was greeted by a butler who took his coat and hat. He was shown into the

drawing room, where a woman with long blonde hair was sitting by the window with what looked like complicated needlework in her lap.

“The Duke of Darrington, my lady,” announced the butler.

Isabelle Kinsley stood, putting aside her work, and greeted him with innocent blue eyes and a charming smile. “James,” she said, “it is so fortunate that you are here.”

James hid a smile at her words. One of the reasons he enjoyed Isabelle's company so much was because her worries seemed so trivial, and they took his mind off his own burdensome troubles.

"I am here at this time every week," James reminded her.

"Yes," she admitted, taking a seat at a small table, "but there have been some developments since I extended the invitation." She turned to the butler and ordered that tea

be brought in. James sat across from her.

“Indeed? What has befallen you this time, Isabelle?”

She let out an overly exaggerated sigh.

“It is the matter of my goddaughter. Her father, Edward, has written and asked that she come and stay with me! I could hardly refuse. The poor Earl of Waymouth has hardly known what to do with Elizabeth since his wife died.”

James felt as if something had struck him

through the heart. Isabelle's mouth dropped open, as if she had only just realized what impact those words would have on James.

"Elizabeth is rather wild, I'm afraid," she said, quickly. "She has always been very...spirited."

James again felt his lips twitching of their own accord. No doubt, Isabelle was trying to say that her goddaughter was very far from being an accomplished young woman as politely as possible.

"She has had no success at all in securing

a marriage, so her father has asked me if I will teach her how to behave properly in society.”

She sighed again. “It is *impossible*, James! The last time I saw the girl, she did not even use the correct utensils at dinner. Her hair was a disaster, and she insulted the man she was sitting next to.”

James hummed in thought, as the tea was brought in and set before them. “How old is she?”

“Eighteen. Her father tells me she has not

really grown up at all since I saw her when she was fourteen.”

James frowned. It wasn't appropriate for a young woman so grown to act in such a manner. “It was good of you to agree to take charge of her.”

Isabelle's eyebrows furrowed together in worry. “She really is a good sort of girl, underneath it all. She just needs some refining.” She met his eyes. “I need your help, James. I am looking to hire someone to help

with Elizabeth, a companion who will stay here so that I will not have to handle this all by myself.”

James frowned. He tried to think of someone he could recommend, but he had so few acquaintances, and even fewer of those were women. “I cannot think of anyone at the moment.” After a second of thought, he realized that he did know one person, though she was long gone. “If only Braith were here.”

Isabelle’s eyes saddened. Her expression

drooped, and the worry drained from her face.

“My dear friend,” she murmured. “She would have been the perfect person to help.” She looked out the window and shook her head. “I always think of her on rainy days.”

“I do, too,” James said quietly, his thoughts drifting back into melancholy. He sat still for a moment, lost in thought, thinking about how much the world was still mourning Braith even after five years.

“When does your goddaughter arrive?”

James eventually asked. He took a sip of tea and relished the comforting taste.

“In one week. I have had a room readied for her use.” Her teacup clattered, as she set it down on its saucer. “I am so very nervous.”

James smiled at her. “If anyone can help her, Isabelle, it is you.”

Isabelle smiled in return. “Thank you, James. Edward told me the same thing when he wrote with his request, but it is so hard to

consider reforming this child that everyone else has failed to tame.”

James relaxed, as the conversation turned to lighter subjects. He found himself drinking several cups of tea and realized that he was more troubled than he had thought. Eventually, he stood and said his goodbyes.

“I wish you the very best of luck, Isabelle,” he said with heartfelt sincerity. “I will endeavor to find you the best help in all of London.”

“Oh, thank you, James! And you will join us for dinner on the day Elizabeth arrives, will you not?”

James hesitated, then decided that, at the very least, it might be amusing to watch this wild girl. “Of course, I will.”

Isabelle’s expression was full of gratitude. “You are an invaluable friend, James.”

“As are you, Isabelle.” He bowed and left

her, somehow feeling even more lonely than
when he arrived.

Chapter 3

Elizabeth couldn't tear her gaze from the view outside the carriage. The streets were crowded with people taking advantage of a rare sunny day. Tall, stately buildings loomed around every corner; many more than Elizabeth had ever seen in one town. She had never been to London, or anywhere this far away from home. It looked so crowded, noisy, and foreign. In that moment, she missed home more than ever.

The carriage brought her to a busy street

lined with grand houses. Elizabeth did not doubt that this was where the very wealthiest people lived. She looked down at herself and noted that her dress was wrinkled from the long journey. She ran her hand through her hair, knowing that it would be knotted and unkempt. She allowed herself a small smile.

Let us see what Lady Kinsley thinks about that!

She stepped down from the carriage, and the servants began to retrieve her belongings. The door of the house opened to reveal Lady Kinsley, though she seemed a good deal older

and shorter than Elizabeth remembered her.

“My dear Elizabeth!” she said, smiling broadly. “How you have grown!” Her eyes flicked over Elizabeth’s form, and a hint of panic tinged her expression.

Elizabeth fought a smug smile. “Lady Kinsley! What a delight it is to see you. It was very kind of you to allow me to live here, though I am sure you had about as much choice in it as I did.”

Mrs. Kinsley opened her mouth, but nothing came out, as though she was trying to determine what to say. "I was more than happy to have you," she eventually said, her smile a little more forced. "I have hardly been able to spend any time with you since you were a child. It will be an opportunity for us to become acquainted again. Please come in," she added.

Elizabeth followed Lady Kinsley into the house. A young gentleman was waiting just inside, his refined clothing boasting a

distinguished status. His brown eyes locked onto Elizabeth as if judging her entire character from a mere look. She could tell that he disapproved, though he hadn't even seen her hair or her dress yet.

“Lady Elizabeth Gladstone, may I introduce my good friend, the Duke of Darrington.”

Elizabeth's eyebrows rose high on her forehead. Had her father not told Isabelle what happened the last time she had met a

duke? Still, Elizabeth curtsied politely. She would decide on this duke's character for herself.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Your Grace.”

The duke bowed his head. “I have heard much about you, Miss Gladstone. Mrs. Kinsley speaks very highly of you.”

Does she really? Elizabeth wondered.

Either Mrs. Kinsley had lied, or the duke was

trying very hard to be polite.

In the beat of silence that followed, Elizabeth saw the duke's gaze focus on her overall disheveled appearance. A frown twitched at his lips. Mrs. Kinsley must have also noticed where his eyes were, because she quickly said, "Elizabeth, you may go up to your room and prepare for dinner. Mr. Campbell will show you the way." The words were polite, but the look in her eyes was a warning. Evidently, Elizabeth thought, this was lesson number one.

Elizabeth used the same tactic, her tone polite but her eyes conveying defiance. “Of course, Mrs. Kinsley.” She would show her godmother that she would not be “tamed.” She was Elizabeth, and no one could turn her into something she was not.

Elizabeth allowed Mr. Campbell to show her up a flight of stairs and into a spacious bedroom. Elizabeth stopped short in the doorway, sincerely struck for a moment at how much effort Mrs. Kinsley must have put into making this room Elizabeth’s new home.

She realized that it really must be intimidating to invite a girl with a bad reputation whom you barely know into your home and agree to teach her, with little help. Mrs. Kinsley was, essentially, treating Elizabeth like a daughter. In a rare moment of empathy, Elizabeth was humbled.

The moment passed, as she watched a maid laying out her clothes. The maid looked up as Elizabeth entered the room, then quickly turned and curtsied.

Mr. Campbell spoke from behind her.

“This is Marie, my lady. She will be your maid while you are here with us. Do you think you are quite settled, my lady?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth said. “Thank you.”

Mr. Campbell left, closing the door behind him. Elizabeth looked over the dresses she had brought, most of them at her father’s insistence. He had bought her a whole new wardrobe in preparation for going to London. She found an evening gown that she liked,

deciding that she at least owed it to Mrs.

Kinsley to change into a different dress.

“I will wear this one tonight,” she said, pointing to the elegant green gown.

“Yes, my lady,” Marie said, beginning to unlace Elizabeth. Once she had changed into the new gown, she looked at herself in the mirror and frowned. It really was too ostentatious.

“What would you like done with your hair, Lady Elizabeth?”

Her hair was a tangled, frizzy mess, hanging loosely in waves all the way down her back. Though she might have changed into a different dress, she *would* retain something of herself.

“My hair will remain as it is, thank you, Marie.”

Elizabeth watched the maid’s shocked expression with glee, barely managing to hold back laughter. The poor girl looked utterly

mortified, her eyes wide, her lips tightly compressed. After a moment, she managed to say, “Very well, my lady.”

Elizabeth took one last look at herself and decided that her appearance was unladylike enough to be noticed. She made her way downstairs and was soon seated at the dinner table with the Duke of Darrington and Lady Kinsley. Their eyes remained glued to her, apparently unable to look at anything else. Elizabeth decided to act as if she had no idea what they were looking at. But internally, she was having the best of times exceeding all

of their expectations about how terrible she was.

Just to show Lady Kinsley—and the duke for that matter—how much she intended to retain her “wild” manner, she decided to have a little more fun at their expense. As she picked up the small fork for intended for the first course, she decided she would use it for every course throughout dinner. She remembered doing something similar the last time she had eaten with Lady Kinsley years ago.

Everyone was silent, as they began eating. The food was rich and tasty, unlike anything Elizabeth had had in years since her father had begun economizing. She forgot about her devious plan for a moment and savored the food.

“Elizabeth,” Mrs. Kinsley began, as if she couldn’t stand the silence, “I trust you left your father in good health?”

“Yes,” Elizabeth replied. “My father is

doing very well. I only worry about what he will do when he is on his own without me.”

“Rest, I imagine,” said the duke, with a hint of a smile. “I have a son of my own, and, though he is everything to me, I must admit that being the constant guardian of a child can be rather draining.”

Elizabeth admitted to herself that he was probably right. It was most likely a relief to her father that she was gone.

“You give so much attention to little Oscar,” Lady Kinsley told the duke. “You are a good father to him.”

“I do try,” he said, sincerely. “I feel I must make up for the lack of another parent.”

Elizabeth paused and tried to discern the duke’s expression. He looked up after a moment and met her eyes.

“Forgive me, Miss Gladstone. My wife was taken by the smallpox five years ago and,

though I do my best with Oscar and the nurse helps tremendously, I fear what he will lack, growing up without a mother.”

Elizabeth felt real sympathy for him, not only because of his words but also the look in his eyes that accompanied them. She could see the true depth of his sorrow. He had not married for wealth, money, or status. It was evident that he had loved his wife deeply.

“I am sorry,” Elizabeth said, softly, casting her eyes down.

“Thank you. I am fortunate, however, that I have a mother who loves Oscar as though he is her own.”

As the next course was served, Lady Kinsley commented, “Dear Mrs. Wordsworth! How is your mother?”

The duke smiled. “She is very well.” He seemed as though he was going to add more, but his attention was suddenly caught by something, and he looked at Elizabeth. As his

forehead wrinkled in confusion, Elizabeth knew he had just realized that she was using the same fork from the first course.

As Lady Kinsley registered the sudden silence, she met Elizabeth's gaze, and her eyes widened. She stiffened, conveying by example that Elizabeth should sit up and maintain good posture. Elizabeth slouched even further. Lady Kinsley deliberately picked up the correct fork and took a bite with it, but Elizabeth simply continued eating with the smaller fork from the first course.

Mrs. Kinsley shook her head and turned her gaze back to the duke. “James, I have not seen you at any balls of late. Please say that you will come to this one. It will be Elizabeth’s first in London!”

Elizabeth only just refrained from rolling her eyes at the mention of a ball. She was sure it would be grander than any ball she had ever attended, and she would be forced to make herself look like a peacock in order to blend in with fashionable society.

If Lady Kinsley intended to draw James' attention away from Elizabeth, it worked. He continued eating, then replied, "I have not decided. I have no interest in attending balls."

"Have you not told me that you wish for more friends? A ball would be an excellent place to meet them!"

"I find it difficult to believe that *you* have few friends, my lord," Elizabeth commented.

“It is true. Lady Kinsley is the dearest friend I have. Ever since my wife passed, I have found it difficult to make new acquaintances.”

“It would be quite easy for you to make friends,” Elizabeth said. “Introduce yourself as a duke, and they are bound to follow you wherever you go.”

Mrs. Kinsley’s fork clattered on her plate, and she shot Elizabeth a dangerous look.

The subject of the ball was dropped, as the next course arrived. Lady Kinsley picked up the correct fork, holding Elizabeth's eyes. Elizabeth kept the same fork in her hand and bent over her food even further.

There was no further conversation. The duke and Lady Kinsley were silent. Elizabeth smiled to herself, as she continued to eat, not caring what they thought of her. She wondered if Lady Kinsley would continue to honor her invitation after this, or simply send her back to her father. Elizabeth felt

triumphant. Even here in London in this fine house, she had retained her freedom. They were trying their best to keep her confined, but she would not remain caged.

In the midst of her reverie, Elizabeth realized the room was much too quiet. She looked up and saw that the duke and Mrs. Kinsley were, without pretense, simply staring at her, their plates abandoned. Elizabeth met both sets of eyes and knew that they were appalled and awed at her poor manners.

Dinner ended with no more conversation, and without Lady Kinsley trying to give Elizabeth any further subtle hints. Elizabeth knew she had conveyed her message. She was not going to let them entrap her.

The duke left soon after dinner, but his farewell to Elizabeth was cold. He spoke privately with Lady Kinsley before he left, and Elizabeth felt sure they were discussing her. After he was gone, Mrs. Kinsley turned to Elizabeth, her expression betraying that she had no idea what to do with her.

“Elizabeth,” she began sadly, then paused. “You must *please* try.”

“Father has sent me here so that I will change,” Elizabeth replied, defiantly. “But I will not change. You cannot make me. I do not wish to injure your feelings, Lady Kinsley. You have been very kind to me, but I will show my father that I am not a lady who can be auctioned off to the closest man with lots of money so that it will save his estate. I will remain who I am.” And with that, Elizabeth

retired to her room.

Chapter 4

One week later, as James was sitting with his mother in the library, he found himself once again thinking with disdain about Elizabeth Gladstone's uncouth and brazen manners rather than focusing on the book in his lap. Over the past several days, he had wondered how Isabelle was living with such a creature. Today Isabelle was to join him and his mother for tea. Then, he would be able to assess the damage himself.

“Will you be attending Lord Brisbane's

ball, James?” Lady Wordsworth’s voice pulled James from his thoughts.

James blinked, coming back to reality to meet his mother’s eyes. “I do not intend to, no. You know I have had no interest in balls since...” He felt there was no need to finish the thought, as his mother already knew.

Lady Wordsworth sighed. “You should try, James. I can see how lonely you are, how much you wish for someone to be at your side.”

James smiled at her. “I have you,
Mother.”

“And one day I will be gone, you know.
You need someone else.” Her eyes shone with
pity. “Braith would not have wanted you to be
unhappy.”

James couldn't answer that, so he turned
back to his book. Once again, he found himself
unable to focus on it, his thoughts of Braith.
He could never love another woman as he had

loved her, nor did he have the slightest interest in trying.

Nevertheless, he knew his mother was still right. Every day he felt acute loneliness, like a physical entity that he was forced to drag around with him. Though he had his mother and Oscar, someone was missing. Someone like Braith.

The butler entered the room. “Lady Kinsley,” he announced, leading in the bright-eyed woman.

Mrs. Wordsworth and James stood to receive their guest. “Wood,” Lady Wordsworth said, addressing the butler, “have the tea brought into the drawing room.”

As the butler left, Isabelle smiled. “My dear friends, it is so good to see you!” She turned to Lady Wordsworth first. “How are you? James tells me you are in good health, but it has been so long since I have been able to ask you personally.”

James could see that his mother was genuinely delighted to see a different face around the house. “I am doing very well, thank you,” she replied. “I hear that you have quite the charge on your hands, Isabelle.”

Isabelle sighed, her expression drooping at the mention of Lady Elizabeth. “Yes, I am afraid so. Elizabeth would have come with me today, but she is paying a visit to her friend, Lady Darwin.”

Lady Wordsworth chuckled. “It is rather

a pity. I wanted to see if what James said was true!”

As the party left the library, Isabelle replied, “It is indeed true. It has only been one week, but already I feel as if she has been living in my house for an age. She has refused every one of my attempts to help her act more like a lady and less like an untamed girl. I fear that it is hopeless.” Her melancholy tone punctuated their entrance to the sitting room.

“Do not give up,” James said gently, as

they took their seats. “I believe you will find someone to help you with Lady Elizabeth and, until then, I will help you as much as I am able.”

“If you do truly wish to help me, James, I entreat you to come to the ball. I will be taking Elizabeth, and I fear I will not be able to handle her on my own. It may be that no man will dance with her if you will not.”

James shifted in his seat, hoping that the servants would enter with the tea to offer a

distraction. “I am not certain of my attendance at the ball,” he said carefully.

Isabelle looked up in a rare moment of levity and met his eyes. “It will not mean you are betraying Braith,” she said softly. “I was her best friend in all the world, and I know that she would have wanted you to be happy.”

“I told him as much this morning,” Lady Wordsworth added. “Thank you, Isabelle.”

James looked down, feeling heat rush to his cheeks, embarrassed that they had both

guessed the reason for his aversion to the ball so easily. “I know that I can never feel the same way about anyone as I felt about Braith. Why should I attend a ball where I will be forced to dance with pretty ladies who look at me only because I am a duke?”

“You cannot say that if you have not tried,” Isabelle said, with a small smile.

“It has been many years since you have gone to a ball,” Lady Wordsworth said.

“And besides,” Isabelle continued, “now you have a different motive, to help me with Elizabeth. You said you would help in any way you could.”

James briefly glanced into their eyes. They had pressured him to attend balls and other functions like this before, but he had never given in. Now, however, Isabelle was asking for his help, and that was something he wasn't sure he could refuse.

Tea was finally served, allowing James to

delay his answer. Once the tea was poured and they began to eat, Isabelle spoke again.

“I have been thinking about your problem, James. Indeed, it is second only to my problem with Elizabeth. I have come up with several women whom I think might be suitable for you.”

James sighed. “Isabelle, please—”

“Just listen, James,” his mother insisted.

He frowned but gestured for Isabelle to continue.

“There is Miss Martha Rowles. Her father is a doctor here in London. I have only met her once, but she was very agreeable. Oh, and what about Miss Joanna Bridgeman? Her family is very respectable.”

James nodded and tuned out Isabelle’s musings, completely uninterested. He couldn’t be attracted to someone without having met them.

“Of course, there is always dear Victoria,” Isabelle continued, “but you know her already.”

James had to keep from wincing. The Countess of Chester had been pursuing him for years, even when they had both been married. Just the thought of her was distasteful.

“The countess is not for me, Isabelle. I appreciate your efforts, but I cannot establish interest in a young lady based solely on family

connection. I must meet her and discern her character first.”

Isabelle shook her head. “You are too serious, James.”

“Perhaps you are not serious enough.”

“Isabelle is only trying to help,” his mother interjected. “We both are.”

“I know. I appreciate the concern you both have displayed on my behalf, and I take

it into account very seriously. To show you that I truly mean it..." James sighed silently, wondering if this was the right decision. "I will go to the ball."

Lady Wordsworth smiled. Isabelle grinned, reaching out to touch his hand. "Oh, James, thank you! You will not regret it. You will see."

"Yes," James sighed, feeling even less certain that he had made the right decision. "We will see."

Chapter 5

Elizabeth purposefully slurped her tea, as she sat at breakfast with Lady Kinsley. She watched the muscles in her godmother's face tighten, but after over a week of living with her, Lady Kinsley had given up trying to send her stern looks.

“Elizabeth,” she said, never one to leave a silence for very long, “I have arranged dancing lessons for you to prepare for the ball in a fortnight. I believe you will find them instructive and invigorating.” She smiled,

looking past Elizabeth. “I remember when I took dancing lessons before my first ball. I was rather clumsy at first, but by the time I arrived at the ball, it was as if I had been doing it for years!”

“Must I go to the ball?” It was almost all Lady Kinsley talked about, and Elizabeth was starting to find the idea rather tiresome.

Lady Kinsley stared at her as though she had just uttered the most profane insult. “Of course, you must go! Lord and Lady Brisbane

were kind enough to include you in the invitation, and it will be the perfect way to make new acquaintances in the area.”

Elizabeth sighed, setting her teacup down a little harder in its saucer than she intended.

“I do not want to dance only so I can be married off to someone who can help my father’s estate.” Her words came out forcefully, causing Lady Kinsley to pause.

“You do realize, Elizabeth,” she said gently, “that marriage is the only way to help

you and your father.”

Elizabeth shook her head. Of course, she *had* realized it, but she didn’t want to accept it. There had to be some other way. Lady Kinsley watched her, waiting for an answer.

“I do not want dancing lessons.”

Lady Kinsley froze. “Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth repeated: “*I do not want dancing lessons*. This is not my first ball, and I can

dance perfectly well. Even if I could not, I doubt any man will dance with me. Even you cannot deny this.”

Isabelle’s mouth dropped open, as it always did when she had no idea what to say in response to Elizabeth. “Elizabeth, I must insist—”

“And I must refuse,” Elizabeth repeated calmly. “I will not take dancing lessons.”

Isabelle’s knuckles whitened, as she

gripped her fork tightly. “You know that I must inform your father of this. You cannot continue in this fashion, Elizabeth.”

“I can, and I will. Tell my father. He has already sent me away. He can do nothing further to injure me.”

Isabelle huffed and then rushed off, probably to write the letter right then and there. Elizabeth realized she had truly upset her, but she couldn't allow herself to care too much. She was not going to be confined and

told what to do.

* * *

After a few mornings of relative silence from Lady Kinsley, they met at breakfast again. Lady Kinsley looked rather grave, but finally addressed Elizabeth.

“Elizabeth, your father has replied to my letter. He wishes you to read this.” She handed her a letter, and Elizabeth opened it, mentally sighing as she could already hear the reproof to come.

Elizabeth,

Lady Kinsley has told me of your behavior since you have been in London, and I find myself severely disappointed. I had hoped that in different company you might find it within yourself to behave, but it seems that you cannot even be kind to a woman who has agreed to bring you into her home at her own expense.

Elizabeth winced, remembering her humbling thoughts when she had first arrived

at Mrs. Kinsley's house.

Therefore, you have forced my hand once again. If you will not listen to Mrs. Kinsley and act like a lady, you will marry Lord Huxley. You do remember him, I trust? He is not the man I would choose for you, but I must see you safe and married, and he is the only man who will accept you.

Please, Elizabeth, be kind to your godmother. Listen, and perhaps you may find a man to marry on your own. I will be awaiting

*Lady Kinsley's next letter reporting on your
behavior.*

Sincerely,

Edward Gladstone, Earl of Waymouth

Elizabeth felt numb. She felt Isabelle's
eyes on her, but the rest of the world
disappeared, apart from the paper in her
hands.

She had met Lord Huxley several times.

He was one of her father's old friends, but he was a known gambler and, overall, a detestable man. Elizabeth felt she would rather die than be married to the likes of him. How could her father do this?

“Elizabeth?” Lady Kinsley asked, bringing her back to reality.

Elizabeth shook her head. “Pardon me, Lady Kinsley. I think I will go to visit Felicia, if it does not interfere with the dancing lessons.”

Mrs. Kinsley blinked in surprise. “No, my dear, they will start tomorrow. Enjoy your visit with your friend.”

Elizabeth nodded and left to get ready for the visit to Felicia. Her thoughts were swirling, and even as she dressed, she couldn't let go of the letter. The paper creased, because she was gripping it so tightly.

She wondered if her father was serious. Though Lord Huxley was an old friend of his, she knew that he had grown rather tired of the

old brute over the years. It wasn't the first time he had given her an ultimatum like this, but it was the most serious.

As she walked to Felicia's house, Elizabeth realized that this was her own fault. She had given her father no other choice. He had been forced into these ultimatums, because she had refused repeatedly to comply with his rules. Sometimes he had carried his threats through, and sometimes he hadn't.

Despite everything, Elizabeth was awed

at how patient he had been with her. It had taken eighteen years of battling her will for him to finally send her away, and then deliver an ultimatum this serious. Many others, she was sure, would have stopped indulging her a long time ago.

Elizabeth sighed. She just couldn't help herself. Society was a cage, and she didn't want to be confined by it. Perhaps she never would fit in, no matter how hard she tried.

Finally, Elizabeth reached Felicia's house.

She knocked on the door and was invited in by the butler, who already knew her well from her previous visits. As usual, the butler led her to the library, where Felicia was in a chair, reading.

“Lady Elizabeth,” he announced.

Felicia looked up with a smile and immediately put down her book. She stood, and Elizabeth rushed over to her. Felicia’s face fell in an instant. She waited until the butler left before asking, “Dear Elizabeth, whatever is

the matter?”

Elizabeth presented the letter for Felicia's perusal, and explained as she read. Confiding in her was like a breath of fresh air. Though Elizabeth was sure that her father had told Isabelle of his decision, Elizabeth couldn't find it within herself to speak of it with her.

As Felicia scanned the letter, and Elizabeth finished her explanation, Felicia's eyebrows rose high on her forehead. “Elizabeth,” she breathed, “you must listen to

your father's wishes! You cannot marry Lord Huxley!"

Elizabeth took the letter back and folded it up again. "I know I cannot! But just as I cannot marry Lord Huxley, I also cannot become something I am not."

Felicia sighed. "You must at least try, Elizabeth. I could not bear to see you married to him."

"I cannot do the things they wish me to

do. Lady Kinsley has arranged dancing lessons for me, and we are to go to the ball in a week. How can I possibly do everything she asks of me? It is against my very nature!”

“Elizabeth,” said Felicia seriously, her blue eyes piercing, “you must find it within yourself to listen, even if only for a little while. If your father forces you to marry Lord Huxley, then you *will* be giving up everything you are, for the rest of your life. If you comply, for now, it may be that you will find a man who truly accepts who you are.”

“As you do,” Elizabeth said with a smile, already feeling better. “What a pity you do not have a brother.”

Felicia laughed, her expression lightening. “So, what *will* you do?”

“Well, I would rather die than marry Lord Huxley,” said Elizabeth. “Do you remember that dinner at my father’s house when we were young? You said that Lord Huxley had teeth like a dog’s!”

Felicia continued laughing, falling back into her chair. “I do remember!”

“If Lord Huxley were a dog,” Elizabeth inquired, “what would he look like?”

“He would be small and stout,” said Felicia, between bouts of giggles.

“With large jowls and crooked teeth.”

“His eyes would be wide and red, and too

far apart.”

“And he would not be able to bark, only whine.”

They collapsed into a fit of laughter, and once Elizabeth recovered, she said more seriously, “I *cannot* marry him, Felicia.”

“No,” she replied. “You cannot marry a dog.”

Elizabeth laughed again, feeling a

thousand times lighter than she had when she had first read the letter.

“Thank you, dear Felicia,” she said sincerely, taking her friend’s hands. “I do not know what I would do without you.”

Felicia smiled. “Come, Elizabeth, let us talk of what you can do to appease Lady Kinsley and your father.”

Chapter 6

“She really has made such improvements, James,” Isabelle began, teacup in her hand. She took a sip of tea and sighed. “That letter from her father seemed to change her mind, thank heavens. I was beginning to wonder what on earth I should do with her!”

“I am glad to hear of it,” James commented, taking a sip of his tea. He knew he was shrinking into himself, dreading what was to come tonight. Though he listened to Isabelle and was sincerely glad of Lady

Elizabeth's improvement, his stomach continued to knot with worry as he considered that he hadn't danced in many years.

“Her dancing lessons have progressed most satisfactorily,” Isabelle continued. “She has hardly complained or purposefully abused her manners once since last week. I believe it has helped her to see her friend, Lady Darwin, as well. *She* is a dear girl and would not do anything to bring attention to herself. She has been good for Elizabeth, I think.”

James nodded. "It is very good that she has a friend. It is important, I believe, for a young lady to have a confidant."

"She is upstairs getting ready as we speak," Isabelle said. "I always like to have tea before a ball. It settles my stomach before the rich food and the dancing. Thank you, James, for joining us."

"It is a pleasure, as always." He smiled. "I do not know what I would do if a week passed by without having tea with you. It has become

a tradition.”

The butler entered and announced the Countess of Chester. James groaned inwardly as he stood to receive the new arrival. Isabelle hadn't told him that she was coming.

The countess entered with a huge smile, her fiery red hair bobbing in curls above her shoulders. Her dark eyes immediately locked onto James.

“Dear James!” she exclaimed, coming to

him immediately. “It is so good to see you again! It has been too long.”

“Indeed, Countess,” James said, forcing a polite tone.

The countess laughed lightly. “How many times must I insist that you call me Victoria? Surely we know each other well enough for that.”

James had to fight to keep his discomfort from showing on his face. “If you truly insist.”

It was what he said every time, but he continued to call use her title.

Victoria turned to Isabelle. “Isabelle! I was so happy to receive your invitation to attend the ball with your little party.” She looked around the room. “And where is your goddaughter, the one you told me about?”

“Upstairs, getting ready,” Isabelle said. “She should be down presently. I am so glad that you decided to come, Victoria.”

“Once I heard that James was finally attending a ball after so many years I could hardly refuse. It has been so long since we have danced together.”

James breathed out a long sigh through his nose, trying to calm himself. He hadn't missed Victoria's wiles and blunt comments in the slightest. She infuriated him, and, in that frame of mind, he always had difficulty deciding how to respond to her.

“How is the wild girl?” Victoria asked, sitting in an extra chair that the butler had

brought over to the table.

“I was just telling James,”, said Isabelle, “how Elizabeth has vastly improved.” “Her father sent her an ultimatum by letter, and since then she has been quite a well-mannered young lady.”

“What sort of ultimatum?” Victoria asked, as a servant poured her tea.

Isabelle scooted forward on her chair, obviously enjoying relating the gossip. “He

said that if she does not behave, he will force her to marry Lord Huxley.”

Victoria snorted and had to cover her face, as she laughed with food in her mouth. “Lord Huxley?” she asked incredulously, wiping her mouth with a napkin. “No one should marry him. He is a vile old brute.”

James looked at her. He didn’t know Lord Huxley himself, and while Victoria’s comment may have been true, he thought it was going a bit far to say that aloud.

“That is just what I thought,” Isabelle said. “Her father knows it too, but he has had enough of Elizabeth’s stubbornness. I really do think that he means it.”

“Well,” Victoria sighed, “the threat of marriage to Huxley is a rather strong motivation.” Her sharp eyes looked at James. “What do you think, James?”

James didn’t want to take part in the gossip that should have only been known to

Lady Elizabeth, her father, and perhaps Lady Kinsley. “I think that it is good Lady Elizabeth has seen the error of her ways, no matter the reason.”

“Oh!” interrupted Isabelle, looking past James to the door.

James turned and saw Elizabeth in the doorway. He immediately stood, and found himself suddenly captivated by her appearance for a long moment, during which time seemed to be suspended. For once she

looked like a lady in her impeccable white gown and her hair perfectly styled. Glittering pins held her shining locks in place around her head. James had to admit that she looked perfectly stunning. And, in that moment, though she wore a bored countenance, he knew that there was more to her. There was someone else hiding behind that rebel facade, and he was determined to find her out, whatever it took.

“My dear Elizabeth,” said Isabelle, “you look absolutely radiant.”

Elizabeth's lips twitched into a small smile, though she quickly reverted to a frown. "Thank you, Lady Kinsley."

James opened his mouth to give his opinion, but just then Victoria stepped forward and intercepted Elizabeth, guiding her further into the room. "What a pleasure to meet you. I have heard so much about you from Isabelle!"

Isabelle stood, smiling. "Elizabeth, may I

introduce my friend, the Countess of Chester?
I spoke of her to you before. She is joining us
at the ball tonight.”

Elizabeth’s eyebrows raised slightly, and
she nodded but gave no other indication that
she reciprocated that pleasure which Victoria
had spoken of.

Victoria continued as though Elizabeth
had appeared to be thrilled to meet her. “I
believe that I have so much I can teach you! I
am sure that Isabelle is doing her very best,

and she has told me that you are much improved, but there are some things only a countess knows.”

Elizabeth’s expression remained stoic, and James bit back a smile. If there was anybody he didn’t mind watching Elizabeth ignore, it was Victoria. It was evident that Elizabeth wasn’t taken in by her guise of helpfulness.

“Well,” Isabelle said, clapping her hands together, “now that we are all here, we should

be going!”

Chapter 7

As they walked out to the carriage,
Isabelle pulled Elizabeth aside.

“Elizabeth,” she said quietly, “you have done very well this past week, and as of this minute, I have a good report to send to your father. Please continue your good work, and do not cause any kind of scandal at the ball. Do you understand?”

Elizabeth bristled at the good-natured advice, but the threat of Lord Huxley was a

constant reminder to be good. Now, she could only picture him in her mind as a dog, which was both a relief and a worry. Elizabeth nodded. “I understand, Lady Kinsley.”

“Good.” Her godmother smiled kindly. “It is time to put those dancing lessons to use.”

James left in his own carriage, while Lady Kinsley, Victoria, and Elizabeth rode in Lady Kinsley’s. Elizabeth found herself sitting next to Victoria and tried her best to sit as far away from her as possible. She couldn’t quite

put her finger on why, but she didn't like the countess. There was something rather unsettling about her.

“So,” Victoria began, as the carriage started its journey, “Isabelle tells me that you are in dire need of a husband. I do hope that someone finds you suitable. I would hate to see such a young and beautiful lady as yourself be married to an old lord like Huxley. It would be such a waste.”

Elizabeth offered Victoria a forced smile

at the comment. She spent the rest of the ride staring obstinately out the window, trying as best she could to ignore Victoria's comments. It seemed like an eternity before they reached Lord and Lady Brisbane's estate, when Elizabeth was free of the terrible woman's company for a moment, as she exited the carriage.

They entered the ballroom to the sound of music. Couples were dancing, and people talked, laughed, and drank. The area was so brightly lit with candles and lanterns that it

seemed there were no shadows in sight.

Elegant furnishings decorated the room, from shining chandeliers to golden door handles.

Elizabeth found herself in a daze, as her senses were suddenly assaulted by it all.

Women in fine dresses fluttered around, all of them seeming to smile in the same way. They laughed and flirted with the men, some obviously taking advantage of the fact that they were not being closely watched by their guardians. Elizabeth's heart pounded, as she realized that *they* were what her godmother

and her father were trying to turn her into.

They all looked the same, like copies of each other. How could she become one of them?

She was who she was. She could not give that up.

“Try to be charming, if you can.”

Victoria’s patronizing voice penetrated Elizabeth’s panic. “Look..., like this.” She glided past Elizabeth, holding her head high, and disappeared into the crowd.

Elizabeth was distracted from her worries

by a spark of annoyance for the countess. She looked around to locate Isabelle, but she was already engaged in conversation elsewhere. Her godmother's eyes met hers, however, and she motioned her forward.

“Ah, Elizabeth! You must meet Lord and Lady Brisbane.” She smiled at Elizabeth, giving her a distinct look that told her not to be on her best behavior. “My goddaughter, Lady Elizabeth Gladstone, come to stay with me for the season,” she informed the Brisbanes.

Lady Brisbane turned to Elizabeth with a smile that was so wide and welcoming that it looked forced. “I hope you are having a pleasant time in London, Lady Elizabeth.” She gestured to the room. “How do you find the ball so far?”

Elizabeth found herself frozen in the face of her hosts. She wanted to say that she found it suffocating, but she couldn't quite get the words out. Isabelle's gaze bored into her, and Elizabeth found she couldn't even swallow.

Her tongue felt as if it were paralyzed.

“Lord and Lady Brisbane.” James’ voice interrupted the awkward pause. “May I say what a wonderful ball you have hosted this evening. The decorations are absolutely exquisite.”

Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief, as the Brisbanes turned their attention from her and thanked James for his compliments. After exchanging a few more pleasantries, James placed a guiding hand on Elizabeth’s back.

“If you will excuse me, I have someone I wish to introduce to Lady Elizabeth.”

The hosts bid them farewell, as if nothing unusual had happened, and James led Elizabeth away into the crowd. They reached an unoccupied corner, where James turned to her, frowning with concern. “Are you well, Lady Elizabeth?” he asked in a low tone. “You look rather pale.”

Once again, Elizabeth found herself

speechless, but this time it was because she wasn't quite sure how to thank him for saving her, and she wanted to know what his motivations were. She felt as though she had never received anything but disapproval from him. She wrung her hands together, her palms slick with sweat, and looked down, entirely overwhelmed.

“Here.” He presented her his handkerchief, which she hesitantly took and balled into her hands.

“Thank you,” she murmured, offering it back to him.

James shook his head. “Please keep it.” He frowned. “What has worried you so?”

“I...” Elizabeth wasn’t quite sure how to describe the way she was feeling so out of place, and after a moment she wondered why she would even try to describe it to the duke. Yes, he had been kind, but he was only an acquaintance. “I would rather not speak of it, my lord,” she said softly.

“Very well, then.” He held out his hand.

“Perhaps we can dance then, rather than talk.”

Elizabeth stared at his hand, then looked into his eyes. “Why would you want to dance with me?” Hadn’t he seen the way she’d acted since the beginning?

James simply raised his eyebrows, waiting.

Elizabeth hesitantly took his hand, and

he led her to where a dance was just beginning. They quickly took their places across from each other. James bowed, and Elizabeth curtseyed. They began the dance in silence, and Elizabeth kept her eyes on him, trying to forget about the rest of the ball happening around her.

Though the ball was threatening to break down all of the composure she had tried so hard to maintain, Elizabeth considered that she had been well-behaved since she had received her father's letter, but she didn't

know how long she could continue. Would her father hang this threat over her head forever?

“My lord,” she began, “has Mrs. Kinsley told you of my father’s threat to force me to marry Lord Huxley?”

They parted ways for a moment in the dance and came back together. “Yes,” he replied.

“Can he really force me?” she asked. It was a question she had been longing to know,

but she hadn't known who to put it to.

Somehow, James seemed like just the right person.

James pursed his lips, and his eyes rolled upward in thought. His body seemed to move automatically to the rhythms of the dance, almost as if he would be able to perform it with his eyes closed. Elizabeth, meanwhile, struggled to maintain the rhythm in her feet.

“He cannot physically force you,” James decided, eventually, “but he can cut off your

allowance and your dowry.”

Elizabeth sighed, knowing that that was as good as her father actually forcing her. She looked around the ballroom. She couldn't see herself beside any of these men who flirted so openly and were only after money and beauty. What if there was no man she could love on this earth? Would she single-handedly doom her father's estate by never finding a suitable husband?

The duke seemed to be deep in thought

for the rest of the dance, and Elizabeth was wrapped up in ruminations herself. When the dance ended, the duke asked if they might continue their conversation. Elizabeth consented and followed him to a quieter room away from the dancing.

He stood across from her and licked his lips, his forehead creased in either concentration or concern. “Lady Elizabeth,” he began, his eyes flashing up to meet hers, “the businesslike manner in which I am about to speak may seem a little unorthodox, but please

consider my words carefully. You are seeking freedom from your father and a potential suitor who, as I understand from Isabelle's description, is rather unlikely to exist. I require a friend and companion, and someone to help me look after Oscar." He paused and took a deep breath. Elizabeth couldn't fathom what he was trying to say.

"I propose that we help each other," he continued. "If you marry me, you will earn your freedom."

Elizabeth's mouth dropped open. She stared at the duke, who was watching her with a solemn countenance, but a spark of hope in his eyes. She barely knew this man, and, though he seemed kind, it would be ridiculous to marry someone so quickly.

“I can save myself, thank you,” she replied quickly, but then she remembered what kindnesses he had bestowed upon her and added, “I am flattered, my lord.”

The duke sighed, looking straight into

her eyes. “You may be able to save yourself,
but can you save your father’s estate?”

Chapter 8

As James waited for Elizabeth's response to his question, he felt his heart pounding in his chest. He wasn't quite sure what had compelled him to propose to her in such a manner. Though he hated to admit it, perhaps his mother and Isabelle had been right after all. He was missing a companion. Something about Lady Elizabeth was exciting yet, in a way, familiar.

Elizabeth laughed a little, shaking her head. James wondered if she was thinking

over what had just happened, as he was.

Finally, she met his eyes again. “I cannot save my father’s estate. It seems like whatever I do, I am bound to disappoint him and bring him closer to ruin.” She frowned, looking down at the ground. “This does seem like a reasonable solution,” she said slowly, “but do you truly understand who you will be marrying?” She met his eyes, and for once, she looked vulnerable, as if she feared his answer.

There she is, he thought, the true

Elizabeth, no longer hiding behind someone else. James smiled. "I do have some idea," he said, with a chuckle, making Elizabeth smile. "But I am willing to learn more."

"It is decided, then?" asked Elizabeth, extending her hand.

James raised an eyebrow.

"I believe this is how one concludes business transactions?" Elizabeth explained, with a small smile on her face.

James shook her hand. “It is decided,” he agreed. He saw movement out of the corner of his eye and realized that Victoria was standing nearby, within earshot. He silently cursed her presence. Elizabeth’s gaze darted in the same direction, and she dropped James’ hand.

“Pardon me, my lord,” she said, regaining some of the nervous demeanor that had been apparent when she first arrived. “I believe I need some air.”

She brushed past Victoria, having no other choice in the small space, and the countess bumped into her. Red wine spilled down Elizabeth's dress. She froze, looking down at the catastrophe.

“Oh dear,” began Victoria, with exaggerated sorrow in her voice, “I am so sorry, Lady Elizabeth. How clumsy of me.”

James glared at Victoria, but she was still relishing Elizabeth's horror, as all eyes in the room registered what had happened. Everyone

was staring at her now. Elizabeth breathed something unintelligible, and then rushed off toward the balcony.

Fuming, James approached Victoria, who was watching Elizabeth leave. “Perhaps Isabelle has lost her touch,” Victoria sighed. “Turning that girl into a proper lady has failed terribly. Such a pity.”

He didn’t even meet her eyes. “If you were the center of negative attention, countess, you would be upset as well,” he

retorted.

Victoria looked affronted, but James couldn't find it in him to care. Instead, he left, wanting to get as far away from her as possible. He looked for Elizabeth, but she had already vanished into the thick throng of people.

“James!”

He heard the voice calling him, but it took him much longer to identify Isabelle

coming towards him. “James, where has Elizabeth gone? She was with you when I last saw her.”

“I was, but there was an accident. Victoria spilled wine on her dress, and I’m afraid she was quite embarrassed.”

Isabelle huffed, standing on her toes, and trying to see over the crowd. “Oh dear. She cannot be seen in such a state!”

As a flare of annoyance flashed through

James, he understood some of the truth in Elizabeth's proclaimed disdain for society. Though Isabelle was a kind woman, at this moment she was more concerned about how Elizabeth looked than how she felt.

“Perhaps it is best that she is left on her own,” James suggested. “She will not cause any trouble this evening.”

“You do not know her as I do.”

James' lips threatened to form a smile, as

he wondered what Isabelle's reaction would be when she found out about their engagement. He didn't feel, however, that now was the right time to tell her.

“I spoke with her. She is nervous, but she will recover herself.” He held out his hand to Isabelle. “For now, my friend, shall we dance?”

Chapter 9

Nothing could please Elizabeth the following morning.

It wasn't the duke's proposal that was bothering her or even the ball itself. It was the fact that, for one shining moment, everything had been perfect when she had accepted James' proposal. Then Victoria had ruined it, bringing her to the lowest of lows within a heartbeat. She hadn't even been able to dance for the rest of the night.

Marie received the brunt of her temper, as Elizabeth found fault with everything she did, from opening the curtains to styling her hair. As Marie left, Elizabeth clumsily apologized, feeling guilty for the way she had treated her, but still not cured of her frustration. She was in such a foul mood that she considered staying in her room instead of going to breakfast, but her stomach growled in protest at the thought.

The breakfast room was empty, and Elizabeth silently thanked the Lord for small

mercies. She wasn't sure if she would have been able to handle Isabelle asking her how she liked the ball and praising the venue to no end.

As she ate alone, her thoughts were finally able to settle somewhat. For the first time since James had proposed, she was able to really think about her decision. A tight knot of fear bunched in her stomach, as the reality of what was happening came crashing down on her. She, who had only last night considered that she couldn't see herself as

anyone's wife, was marrying the Duke of Darrington, whom she barely knew.

Elizabeth didn't regret her decision, but the thought that her whole life was changing practically overnight felt rather overwhelming. Yet, as James had said, this marriage provided the only way out of the mess she was in. She had always feared allowing her father's estate to go to ruin, and now, with James' help, she could assist her father. She would also be out of danger from Huxley, and, finally, she would not be ordered around by her godmother and

her father.

But what if James ordered her around just as much? What if he tried to turn her into a proper young lady just like her father had done? What if by marrying James she was only condemning herself to a life of confinement?

Elizabeth shivered, but was unable to dwell on her thoughts, as the Countess of Chester was announced. Elizabeth set her teacup back on the saucer hard enough that it

clattered loudly. The countess was the very last person to improve her sour and anxious mood.

The Countess' hair was a little more free flowing today, contrasting starkly with her emerald green dress. Elizabeth relaxed a little, chuckling quietly to herself at how much the woman resembled a grasshopper.

“Good morning, Lady Elizabeth,” the countess said, with a tight smile. “I trust you passed a peaceful night after the difficulties at

the ball?”

Difficulties which you caused, Elizabeth thought. She didn't even bother standing to receive the countess. “I slept perfectly well last night, thank you,” Elizabeth replied icily.

The countess' dark eyes narrowed. She sat delicately across from Elizabeth and was immediately served tea. “Has your maid been able to clean your dress?” Before Elizabeth could respond she continued, “Though it seems you have plenty of other gowns, anyway.” She eyed Elizabeth's dress as if she

were scrutinizing every single thread. “I imagine you will not concern yourself with such luxuries once you have married Lord Huxley.”

Elizabeth glared at her. She wanted to retort by informing her that she would, in fact, be marrying James, a man the countess seemed to have an eye for, but she knew she had to wait for James to announce the engagement. Instead, she replied, “One may wear the King’s jewels and still look as cheap as a shilling.” Just as she finished her

sentence, Lady Kinsley walked into the room and gasped in shock.

“Young lady, you should have your mouth washed out with soap! How can you speak in such a manner to a countess?”

Elizabeth pressed her lips together and continued to glower at the Countess. She met Elizabeth’s gaze, her eyes flashing with a look that said *this is not over*. Out loud, she spoke in a patronizing tone, “Do not be so hard on the girl, Isabelle. She is still young, after all.”

Elizabeth balled her hands into fists underneath the table, unable to speak lest she say something that would get her into deep trouble and force Isabelle to write to her father. She felt heat pricking at her cheeks. As much as she was unsure about her engagement to James, she didn't want to do anything that would put it in jeopardy.

As Lady Kinsley sat and began eating breakfast, she seemed to forgive Elizabeth for her earlier comment to the countess. "What

did you think of the ball last night, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth kept her gaze downcast. “It was perfectly adequate.” She shot a look at the countess that Isabelle missed. It would have been a happy night if she had not been forced to sit down all evening after her first set of dances, because of her ruined dress.

“Adequate?” repeated Lady Kinsley. “I believe it was one of the finest balls I have ever been to!”

“I thoroughly enjoyed myself,” the countess agreed, casting a glance back at Elizabeth.

“I saw you dancing with James,” her godmother continued. “Was that not enjoyable? I have danced with him myself and know that he is an excellent dance partner.” She smiled. “I am very glad to see the two of you getting along. James is one of my closest friends. I hoped before you even arrived that he would approve of you.”

Elizabeth fought to keep a smile hidden at the thought of possessing a secret that would no doubt startle Lady Kinsley immensely. “He was a very good dancer,” she admitted, “and I enjoyed my conversation with him.”

Lady Kinsley continued to press Elizabeth for more praise about the ball, but after Elizabeth stubbornly kept to short answers time and time again, she gave up at last, and turned to the Countess. They talked of local gossip and important happenings at the ball,

while Elizabeth silently nibbled at her breakfast.

“The Duke of Darrington,” Mr. Campbell announced. The words broke Elizabeth’s angry mood, and she looked up to see James enter the room. He immediately met her eyes and smiled warmly. Somehow, Elizabeth felt herself smiling back. She tried to picture herself as his wife, and for the first time, it didn’t seem impossible. In fact, she thought he could prove to be a very good friend.

“James!” Lady Kinsley stood. “What a surprise! I did not think you would be joining us this morning.”

James bowed his head. “I apologize, Isabelle. I did not mean to catch you off guard, but there is something of great importance that I feel you, as my closest friend, must know.” His gaze shifted to the countess, and he frowned, seeming to only just notice her presence. He stepped forward, however, and stood behind Elizabeth. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end.

“Isabelle, Lady Elizabeth and I are engaged.”

Of all the shocks Elizabeth had caused Lady Kinsley over the past couple of weeks, Elizabeth could tell that this announcement was the most surprising thing she had seen or heard so far. Her eyes became as wide as saucers, and her eyebrows seemed to now permanently live just under to her hairline. She looked back and forth between James and Elizabeth. Unintelligible sounds came from her

mouth. In contrast, the countess didn't look surprised in the least.

“Well,” Lady Kinsley managed to breathe after several seconds of silence. “This is quite the surprise, James. You do have your unpredictable moments, I suppose. I believe that congratulations are in order.” She smiled, but confusion remained in her eyes. “When did this happen? I saw the two of you dancing last night, but I never thought...”

“It was at the ball,” James affirmed. “I

presented the idea to Lady Elizabeth, and she happily accepted.”

Lady Kinsley looked at Elizabeth with curiosity. “I must say, Elizabeth, you have made a very wise choice. Your father will certainly be pleased.” Her tone implied that it might have not been such a wise decision on James’ part.

“I sincerely hope so,” James said. “Which reminds me, Lady Elizabeth, that we must visit your father to ask for his approval.”

“Yes,” Elizabeth agreed. “We must.” She wondered if she should, or even could, insist that he call her Elizabeth. They were engaged after all.

Lady Kinsley smiled as she looked at the couple, seeming finally happy about what was happening. “I propose a toast to a happy marriage and long, healthy lives.”

The countess, who had remained silent thus far, scoffed. “How can you salute this

engagement with just tea?” She stood and crossed to the corner of the room. “I will pour us some brandy.”

While Lady Kinsley spoke with James, Elizabeth watched the countess. As she approached the decanter, she cast a furtive glance to the side and reached into her skirt. Elizabeth stood and followed her.

“What are you doing?” Elizabeth asked, peering over her shoulder. The countess held a dark flask and was pouring it into a glass.

If the countess was startled by her presence, she didn't show it. She laughed airily and pocketed the flask. "Oh, I do prefer my own brandy." She smiled and handed Elizabeth a different glass, already filled from the decanter. Elizabeth took it without question, putting the odd behavior down to the countess' jealousy.

They all drank to Elizabeth and James' health and happiness. Elizabeth shared a smile with James and thought that perhaps, for

once, her life was going to be happy.

Chapter 10

James visited Isabelle's house almost daily. He had already informed his mother of his engagement, and while Lady Wordsworth had reservations about Elizabeth Gladstone, she trusted her son to make the best decision and sent him off with her good wishes every day. James was beginning to feel better about the engagement as the days went by and he discovered more about Elizabeth. The only cloud in the sky was that the Countess of Chester had also become a frequent visitor in Isabelle's home, and she seemed to interrupt

him and Elizabeth at the most inconvenient times.

A few days into this frequent visitation, the party at Isabelle's house found themselves trapped inside for the foreseeable future due to a violent storm that raged outside. While Isabelle tried to convince the party to play whist, James expressed his wish to play a game of chess instead.

“Do you enjoy chess, Lady Elizabeth?” he asked.

Her eyes twinkled with playfulness. “I admit that I have only played once or twice with my father. He always wins within a few moves.”

“I must teach you, then. It is my favorite pastime.” He looked to Isabelle. “If you do not mind, Isabelle, I would like to play chess with Lady Elizabeth instead.”

Isabelle smiled. Now that she had overcome the shock of their engagement, she

had shown herself happy to give in to their wishes. “Of course, James. Victoria and I can play cards on our own.”

The countess’ frown said that she didn’t much enjoy the idea, but James didn’t dwell on it. A table was brought out and the chess set fetched. “Now,” James said, as he picked up one of the pieces, “which color would you like to be, Lady Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth frowned in thought before saying, “I will choose white.”

James began setting up the white pieces on her side. “May I ask why?”

“I may not know very much about chess, but I do know that the white player goes first,” she said, smiling.

“It seems that you already have the advantage, then.” He finished setting up the board and gestured for Elizabeth to make her first move.

“The first move is everything,” said James. “It can determine the rest of the game.”

Isabelle sighed from across the room. “You will soon regret playing with James, Elizabeth. He takes chess far too seriously.”

Elizabeth’s eyes were bright with amusement, as she glanced up at him. “Will you look in judgment upon me if I make a wrong move?”

“Not at all. Though I can, if you wish, give you some suggestions on how to improve.”

“We will see. As I’m sure you already know, I do not like being told what to do.” She laughed, but vulnerability shone in her expression when she looked down quickly to move one of her pawns forward.

“I would never dream of doing that,” James said sincerely, speaking softly. “Though I must say, that move may cause you trouble

later on in the game.”

Elizabeth chuckled, her eyes on the chessboard, as James moved a pawn.

“Do tell us what you are whispering about,” Victoria called.

James frowned, and Elizabeth looked up at him in barely hidden alarm. “I was instructing Lady Elizabeth on her best course of action,” he said, watching relief flood Elizabeth’s expression. Though he had only

known her for a short time, he knew that he didn't want to do anything to betray her trust. Perhaps it was because she reminded him so much of Braith...

The countess barked a laugh. "I find it amusing that though you are engaged to her, you still insist on calling her Lady Elizabeth. There is such a thing as being too polite, James."

"And being too familiar," James muttered, turning back to the game. He could

tell that Elizabeth was fighting back laughter.

All was silent for a few minutes while they made their moves. Elizabeth did play rather poorly, but he could tell that she was trying. He thought that perhaps she was one to learn by experience rather than lecture, so he allowed her to make her own mistakes. Often, she realized her errors as soon she had made them.

“If you are comfortable with the familiarity,” Elizabeth said after a while, “you

may call me Elizabeth.”

“I suppose the countess is right.” James kept his eyes on the game. “Perhaps I am being too polite.”

“I believe the rules of etiquette state that once you have formed a friendship with someone, it is proper to address them by their Christian name while in private conversation. We are friends, aren’t we?” Elizabeth kept her eyes downcast, but James knew it was because she was fearful of his response.

“Of course, we are..., Elizabeth.”

She seemed to be holding back a smile, as she made her next move. James smiled to himself as well, enjoying the familiarity. It had been a long time since he had been able to be so honest with someone. Even with Isabelle and his mother there were always things he felt he had to hold back. With Elizabeth it was different. They looked past social status and titles to see each other as they truly were.

“Elizabeth,” Isabelle called, after another prolonged silence, “I am expecting Doctor and Mrs. Steele tomorrow. I did not want to forget to tell you so that you may choose your gown ahead of time and get yourself ready.”

Just by the way the muscles in Elizabeth’s hands grew tense, James knew that she wanted to protest. Her head snapped up and she opened her mouth, but her eyes met James’. Elizabeth held his gaze for a moment before letting out a sigh. “Yes, Lady Kinsley. Thank you.” In a lower tone she added, “There

is still time for my father to marry me off to Lord Huxley, I suppose.”

The disdain in her voice was enough to tell James that it was the last thing she wanted. “Tell me, have you always been so averse to proper society?” He tried to say it as delicately as possible, and he could tell Elizabeth was amused.

“Have I always been difficult, do you mean?” She laughed lightly. “Yes, ever since I was a child. My mother and father hardly

knew how to handle me. It seems now as if half of the words out of their mouths were ‘no’ and ‘stop.’” Her lips turned down into a frown. “Though I do suppose it was worse after my mother died.” Her brow furrowed, as if she were wondering how to continue before she was interrupted.

“Oh, let us not talk of such sad things,” said the countess.

Elizabeth, still looking saddened, seemed not to have the energy to speak about the

subject anymore or even debate with the countess. James looked over his shoulder, but the countess seemed to be engrossed in her card game. He shook his head. Just when he was starting to know more about Elizabeth, the countess had to get in the way.

Elizabeth's mood was a little more somber for the rest of the day. Once the rain let up, James decided he should be on his way. He was more determined than ever to unlock Elizabeth's mysteries, but how could he hope to do so without the countess getting in

the way?

* * *

A few days later, the sun shone brightly over London. The streets were crowded with people, as James was driven to Isabelle's house. He found himself glad that the party he would meet there was small. Just the sight of the packed streets had him longing for more solitude.

However, his spirits were dampened when he found Victoria had already arrived

with a plan to ride to Hyde Park.

“It is such a lovely day,” Victoria said,
“and we must take advantage of it.”

Isabelle agreed with her friend, saying
that Elizabeth had not yet been to the park.
James was less enthusiastic. While he would
enjoy the fresh air, he knew that on a day like
this, the park was destined to be overcrowded.
He knew he would be overruled, however, and
so he consented to the plan. Elizabeth was
given no choice in the matter by the two other

ladies, so the four of them soon departed in Elizabeth's barouche for Hyde Park. As they approached, James could hear the noise. They drove into throngs of people, some in carriages and some walking, all talking, laughing, and taking advantage of the good weather.

James met Elizabeth's eyes. Her expression betrayed her boredom, and her eyes drooped as if she were about to fall asleep. Victoria and Isabelle talked of driving the carriage around, but James finally spoke

up against them.

“Shall we not take a walk along the footpath?” he suggested. “It will afford us the chance of meeting acquaintances more easily, and we may benefit from the exercise.”

Elizabeth smiled at him, perking up a little. They alighted from the carriage and walked on a crowded footpath through the park.

“This was not quite what I imagined

when they told me of Hyde Park,” Elizabeth muttered, as they tried to maneuver through the crowds of people. She moved so quickly that James feared losing her in the crowd. He took her arm, causing her to pause, and guided her hand to his arm.

“Believe me,” James said, “you do not want to get lost here.”

Elizabeth blinked and then nodded. She looked over her shoulder to see Isabelle and the countess following a little further behind.

“One benefit to all the noise, I suppose,” Elizabeth said, “is that the countess will not ask that we tell her everything we say to one another.”

James chuckled. “That is very true.” She was right. Though it was crowded, the cover provided them with the best circumstances under which to talk.

“The last time we had a chance to speak privately, you mentioned your mother.” He

swallowed. “Forgive me if it pains you to speak of it—”

“No,” Elizabeth interrupted, so softly that James could barely hear her. “It was smallpox. I was fourteen. My father..., he did not wish to trouble me, so he kept the severity of my mother’s condition from me.” She turned her face away from him, as they broke through the crowd and came to a quieter section of the park. “I did not have the chance to say goodbye.”

James' heart softened, and he let a moment of silence pass. "I'm sorry."

"Ever since then, Father has not been the same. He has not treated me like a daughter." She shook her head and pressed her hand to her face. "Forgive me, I do not mean to speak rashly."

For a moment, James was taken aback that she would apologize for such a thing when she had spoken rashly many times before. "Do not trouble yourself. I understand

your grief. My father died in battle eight years ago. I did not get to say goodbye to him, either.”

Elizabeth pressed his arm and looked at him in sympathy. “Was that at the same time as your wife?”

As James looked into her eyes, he knew that she was not asking out of simple curiosity or for the sake of gossip, but so that she could understand him. Braith had given him the same look so many times.

“She died a little before.” Looking at Elizabeth suddenly brought back so many memories of Braith that he had to look away.

“How difficult it must have been for you.”

James nodded, thinking back on those dark times. “If it had not been for my mother, Oscar, and Isabelle, I do not know what would have become of me.”

“There you are!”

The cloud of levity was broken by Isabelle rushing forth with a smile. “We ran into Lady Fletcher wearing the most gorgeous gown! You should have seen it, Elizabeth. She looked stunning! Didn’t she, Victoria?”

But the countess’ eyes had narrowed, flashing between James and Elizabeth. James noted that she particularly seemed taken aback at Elizabeth’s hand on his arm.

“Yes, indeed” she said, absentmindedly.

“I am sorry to have missed it,” Elizabeth said, a sarcastic note in her voice. However, Isabelle seemed not to notice and carried on chattering.

They continued walking, though Isabelle carried most of the conversation. James felt pressure on his arm and looked down at Elizabeth. She smiled up at him, her eyes showing a soft familiarity that he hadn’t seen before. He put his hand over hers and smiled

back.

It struck James that he thought he might be on his way to falling in love, and he wasn't entirely sure how he felt about it.

Chapter 11

“What do you think of this dress for the ball, Elizabeth?”

As Felicia asked the question, Marie pulled out a light pink gown with floral embroidery along the neckline. She held it up for the two ladies to see.

“It is beautiful, Felicia, but I am not certain about wearing it to the ball.” For the first time in her entire life, Elizabeth felt a nagging desire to pick exactly the right gown

for a ball. Even after looking over several of her dresses with Felicia at her side, nothing seemed good enough.

“You must pick one!” Felicia insisted.

Elizabeth sighed. “I know I must, but perhaps now is not the best time.” She dismissed Marie and sat dejectedly in a chair.

Felicia approached her with sympathy in her eyes. “I know why you are so concerned with what you are wearing. You are

wondering what the duke will think!”

“That is ridiculous.” Elizabeth turned her face away from her friend, knowing that Felicia could often read her too well. “I may be escorted by James, but it is a ball just like any other.”

Elizabeth could see Felicia’s searching gaze out of the corner of her eye. “Do you really like him?” Felicia asked softly.

Elizabeth considered her true feelings

before answering. Her thoughts about James were rather muddled. She had enjoyed their time together over the past couple of weeks, but she kept avoiding the question of how she really felt about him. “I admire him, certainly,” she began slowly. “I suppose I might ... like him.”

Felicia grinned, letting out a squeal of delight. “Oh, Elizabeth, I am so happy for you! The duke is such an honorable man, and it is very clear that he brings out the best in you.”

Elizabeth started at the words. It had never occurred to her before, but it was true. He calmed her, made her feel at ease. She wondered if it was all because of how he had helped her so effortlessly at the previous ball.

“He is certainly the best match for you,” Felicia finished.

Elizabeth huffed and looked into Felicia’s eyes. “Felicia, you cannot repeat what has been spoken here. I told you that James and I made a deal. We are to be friends only.”

Felicia only continued to smile
knowingly.

Her embarrassment rising, Elizabeth
stood and walked across the room. “He is still
grieving his wife! I cannot compete with her,
and I do not think he can ever have feelings
for another. He talks about her much too
often.” Elizabeth didn’t think any less of him
for it. If anything, it raised his character in her
esteem.

“I do not doubt that he still feels the loss of his wife very strongly, but perhaps he will have new feelings for you. Perhaps he never thought he could feel that way again until you.”

Elizabeth shook her head, a little afraid that what Felicia said was true. What if he was in love with her? Was she in love with him? “Let us speak of other things. What are you wearing to the ball?”

After an hour of idle chatting, Felicia

declared that she had to leave. Though Elizabeth adored her friend, she was grateful for the silence when she left. She knew that Isabelle was out visiting an acquaintance and would not return until late, so she ordered tea brought to the garden.

Elizabeth sighed, as she sat in the garden. It was another mild day, and, though the sun was covered by a layer of clouds, it was not too cold. Birds chirped and sang in the trees nearby. Elizabeth closed her eyes and drank it all in, thinking that it had been a long time

since she had been able to truly enjoy solitude like this.

A shadow fell over her. Elizabeth opened her eyes to possibly the worst sight possible. The Countess of Chester.

Elizabeth sat up. The world immediately felt colder, as if the countess brought a chill with her. The sun seemed to darken even further behind the clouds.

“Elizabeth, what a wonderful spot you

have chosen for tea. It is a very pleasant day,
is it not?”

A spike of irritation rose in Elizabeth at the familiarity of her address. “It is, indeed, Countess,” she replied coldly.

“Might I join you here until Isabelle returns?”

Elizabeth very seriously considered saying no, just to see what the woman would do. But now, more than ever, she didn’t want

to ruin her marriage to James by doing anything rash that would make Isabelle write to her father. So, grudgingly, she nodded. As the countess sat, Elizabeth turned her body slightly away from her.

Only a moment of blissful silence passed before Victoria began to speak again. “I am sure it must be a comfort to know you will be marrying James rather than that odious Lord Huxley.” She paused. “It is a pity, though,” she added softly, as though imparting a secret, “that he lives with the ghost of his late wife.”

A pang of worry went through Elizabeth. She tried to ignore Victoria's words, but as she continued talking the fear only became more deeply rooted.

“As your friend, Elizabeth, I must tell you that it is no use falling in love with him. James only looks for women who resemble his dear Braith. Why else would you have caught his eye?”

Her anxiety rose to a peak as Elizabeth

wondered if she was right. She had seen it in his eyes, even heard him say that she reminded him of his wife. Tears stung her eyes, and she rose quickly to leave.

The countess grabbed her hand, forcing Elizabeth to stop. “Forgive me. I did not mean to upset you. I only meant to say that you must have patience with him. He is still grieving, and I know that he speaks of Braith often.”

Elizabeth frowned and settled back in her

chair. “How do you know how often he speaks of her?” Though the countess had overheard some of their conversation, James had always kept personal things about his wife quiet enough so only she could hear.

“Oh,” said the countess, with an airy chuckle, “I have known James for many years. He talks to me about his grievances. I am one of his greatest friends.”

Elizabeth found herself in a state of confusion. James never seemed to have an

interest in conversing at length with the countess, but how else would she know so much about him?

“Some even say,” she continued, “that James believes Braith is still alive.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “That is absurd.”

“Is it?” She patted Elizabeth’s hand.

“Have you not noticed how he speaks of her as if she is still here? How he talks about the past

like it is happening right now?”

The words seemed to ring with more truth as the silence went on. The Countess eyed Elizabeth while she stared down at her rapidly cooling tea. Elizabeth stood and paced in the grass, thinking over what the countess had said. Perhaps everything she knew about James was a lie. Perhaps she had read him entirely wrong. She had thought he had real affection for her, but she had also thought that he showed no regard for the countess.

And what of his late wife? She seemed to be all James ever thought of. Elizabeth had understood and been patient with him, but after both his father and his wife dying, what if James' mind had been altered? What if he was still stuck in the past with his wife?

Is that all I am, she wondered, someone to fill the shoes of his late wife because I remind James of her just enough?

Elizabeth shuddered, her perfect world had cracked in a moment.

“Do not fret over it. Come and sit. Enjoy the sunshine while it lasts.”

Elizabeth looked up at the sky. She hadn't even noticed that the sun had come out at last. Now her whole world was dark.

Chapter 12

James arrived at Isabelle's house in such high spirits that not even the cloudy sky could curb his enthusiasm. He found it ironic that he had complained about going to the last ball, yet at the prospect of this one, he found himself excited. He was looking forward to dancing with Elizabeth again and spending more time with her, especially without the countess in the way.

Elizabeth had refused to tell him what she was wearing to the ball, so it had been left

to his imagination to picture what she would look like. He had no doubt that she would be stunning.

Isabelle, Victoria, and Elizabeth were waiting for him when he arrived. They all greeted him warmly, but James found his attention fixed solely on Elizabeth. She wore a yellow gown that, when coupled with the bright color of her hair, seemed to make her glow. She offered James a weak, but sincere, smile.

“You look radiant, Elizabeth,” he said. A faint blush crept into her cheeks.

“James, how wonderful you look!” the countess commented before even a moment of silence could pass.

James nodded but said nothing. He wasn’t in the mood to bear with her tonight, and he was glad that he wouldn’t have to spend time with her at the ball.

Having received no reply from James, the

countess turned to Elizabeth. “My poor Elizabeth, you look pale. That is a rather small gown for you. Here is a handkerchief in case you have need of it.” She held out a handkerchief towards Elizabeth, who stared at it for a long moment, frowning, before grabbing it unceremoniously and carefully walking to James.

“I hope you two have a wonderful evening,” said Isabelle. “Public balls can be rather fun. Now I almost wish I were going.” James noted that now she did not need to

warn Elizabeth about her behavior with a private word or even a look.

“Come, Isabelle,” the countess said, “we will have an exciting evening ourselves!”

James offered Elizabeth his arm, and she took it as he led her outside. He took her hand to help her into the carriage, causing Elizabeth to stare at him wide-eyed for a moment. He kept hold of her hand for as long as he could before getting into the carriage himself.

In a moment, the carriage began moving forward. Elizabeth smiled up at James, but then she looked down at her hands and fidgeted. James thought he noted some similarities in her behavior to that at the previous ball.

“Are you nervous about the ball?” he asked quietly.

“No,” she said quickly, sitting up a little straighter. “Not at all.”

James frowned, wondering what this could all mean. Then he realized that this was the first time that they had ever been truly alone together. Normally she was quite comfortable around him, but he supposed that for any young lady, it might be a little daunting.

Set on putting her at ease, James smiled and said, “At least this time the countess will not be there to spill wine all over your dress.”

Elizabeth chuckled, and her mood

seemed to lighten. As her laughter faded, a more serious look came into her eyes, as she met his gaze. “She likes you, doesn’t she?”

James tried to discern the real meaning behind the words. Was she jealous? Could it be that she felt more for him than just friendship?

“If so, it is unrequited.” For some reason, he felt that he needed to reassure her that his affections didn’t belong to anyone else. Could it be that he was feeling more for her?

Elizabeth smiled at him.

Normally James didn't mind silence, but he felt Elizabeth's increasing anxiety, so he continued speaking. "Now," he said, "I know you said your friend Lady Darwin will be at the ball as well."

"Yes." Just the mention of her friend made Elizabeth look more relaxed, though he thought that she still appeared a little pale. "I know you have met her before in passing, but

I am excited to introduce you to her.”

“I am looking forward to knowing her better. I only wanted to say that if you would like to speak to her privately at any time tonight, just say the word. I will not be offended. I know she is a dear friend to you.”

Elizabeth nodded, but seemed as though she didn't want to continue the conversation. James frowned at her. She really was not acting herself tonight.

Wringing her hands together, Elizabeth suddenly spoke. "I am starting to feel rather unwell."

James rested his hand on her shoulder. "Is it the carriage? Should we stop?"

Elizabeth hugged her arms around herself. "I was feeling ill before you arrived, but it has only grown worse."

"You cannot go to the ball in this state. We will turn around." He instructed the

driver, and the carriage turned around back towards Isabelle's house.

James pressed her hand. "Will you be all right until we reach Isabelle's house?"

She edged a little closer to him. "Yes, I think I will be." She squeezed his hand in return. "Thank you."

The ride back was silent. James could tell that Elizabeth was in agony, so he did not think it improper to hold her hand on the way

back. Elizabeth periodically squeezed his hand gratefully, and while James enjoyed the familiar contact, he wished it were under better circumstances.

When they reentered Isabelle's house, both Isabelle and the countess were in shock at Elizabeth's state. They instantly escorted her upstairs to her bedroom, where Isabelle ensured James that they were seeing to her every comfort.

James waited downstairs, unable to sit or

find any occupation. Elizabeth had looked very ill.

“Such a pity that you could not attend the ball, James. Elizabeth’s sickness was timed very unfortunately,” the countess remarked.

“I don’t believe she had a choice in the matter,” James responded, without even looking in her direction.

“Elizabeth is asleep now,” Isabelle announced, as she came down the stairs. Her

forehead was wrinkled with worry. “She has a fever, I think. I will call for the doctor in the morning.” She sighed. “Such an unhappy circumstance. I think that I will also retire soon.”

“I will call tomorrow to see how Elizabeth is faring,” the countess declared.

“I will be here tomorrow as well. Tell Elizabeth that my prayers and good wishes are with her.” He looked up the staircase, wishing that he could see her again and wish her well.

However, it was not to be. James stepped out into the cool night and left, unable to keep himself from worrying.

Chapter 13

For the third day in a row, Elizabeth awoke feeling groggy and unable to get out of bed. All sorts of visitors had come to see her—Felicia, James, the countess—and they seemed to be worried about how suddenly her sickness had come on. The doctor had stated she had an ague, but it was the kind of diagnosis that did not seem certain.

Elizabeth certainly wasn't satisfied with

it. A theory had been forming in her mind that seemed a little outrageous, but she continued to consider it, nonetheless. The countess had tried to get very close to her recently. She remembered that flask that the woman had pulled out of her skirt once James had announced their engagement. Could the countess have put something in her drink? Could that be what was causing this illness?

She knew that the countess admired James and wanted him for herself, but would she go to such lengths? She claimed to be

Isabelle's friend. Was she capable of injuring her closest friend's goddaughter in that way?

Elizabeth shook her head. She was being fanciful. Perhaps the doctor was right, and it was just a simple *grippe*. She dismissed her suspicion, but it remained in the back of her mind.

The door opened, and Marie informed Elizabeth that the Duke of Darrington was asking to see her. Elizabeth had to smile. James had called on her every day since her

illness had started, bringing her comforting words and small gifts.

“You may allow him in,” Elizabeth said.

James strode in, holding a bouquet of yellow wildflowers. Elizabeth smiled at him, beaming when she spotted the flowers that seemed to brighten up the room. Marie said she would find a vase for the flowers and left, leaving the door open.

“How are you feeling, Elizabeth?” James

asked, setting down the flowers by her bedside.

“A little better, I suppose.”

“I am glad to hear it.” He stood rigid with his hands behind his back. “I was thinking that once you are recovered, we can take my carriage to Deuney Keep and speak to your father about our engagement.”

“Yes, that is an excellent idea.” Elizabeth was too exhausted to explain that she needed

a break from London and especially from the countess.

James smiled. “Good.” He cleared his throat and looked around the room. He spotted a book by Elizabeth’s bed and leafed through it. “Ah,” he murmured, “I have heard about this Jane Austen from my mother.”

“I did not find her first book very remarkable, but this one does make me laugh.” She sighed. “My father has tried to discourage me from reading novels, but I’m

afraid I cannot stop.”

“There is nothing wrong with novels. I read them from time to time myself, although I have not made much time for reading as of late.” He scrutinized the book some more.

“*Emma*,” he murmured. He met Elizabeth’s eyes. “Laughter is good for your health, is it not? Shall I read to you, Elizabeth?”

“Only if you will not criticize my taste in books.”

“Oh no,” said James, as he sat on a chair, book in hand. “I would never dream of it.”

* * *

Elizabeth felt a thrill of excitement run through her as the carriage began its long journey to Deuney Keep. It seemed like only yesterday that Elizabeth had come to London, but at the same time, it felt like it had been years. She considered how much had changed since then, how much *she* had changed.

“What are you thinking of?” James asked, seated beside her.

She turned to face him. “I am thinking how much has changed since I came to London.”

James nodded thoughtfully. “It has been many weeks. How do you look back on your time in London so far?”

“I’m not sure.” Elizabeth turned and looked out of the window again to hide the blush that was threatening to creep up to her cheeks. When she thought back on it, it had

been miserable up until the first ball when James had come to her rescue. Since then, it had been rather happy, apart from being ill, of course. “There have been some difficult times, but many happy days, too.” She wondered how James would react to that statement, but she didn’t dare glance at him.

“Are you happy to be going home?”

“It will be good to see my father again, and my home.” She smiled, thinking it safe to meet his gaze now that the topic had moved

on. "I lived there all my life before I came to London."

James nodded. "That explains why it means so much to you."

Elizabeth found herself stunned at the understanding in his eyes. She had never told him plainly that her home meant the world to her. Clearly, he had been paying attention.

"Yes. I couldn't bear to see it gone to ruin or lived in by somebody else. And it would hurt my father so much."

“Explain your relationship with your father. You have told me about your mother, but I know very little about him.”

Elizabeth tapped her fingers on her leg, as she thought about her answer. “I love my father. I think he tries to do what is best for me, but since my mother died, I do not think he knows what that is. He has always seemed more afraid of me and what I would do instead of being affectionate towards me. That only made me more eager to misbehave. Many

times, he would give me what I wanted because he was afraid of what I would do as the alternative.”

“And that is why he gave you the ultimatum to marry Lord Huxley.”

“Yes,” she sighed. “He knew that was the only way to stop me. He did similar things in the past, but not often.”

James frowned, his eyebrows knitting together. “Do you think he will approve of our

marriage?”

Elizabeth laughed a little at James' uneasiness. “I do not think he actually wanted me to marry Huxley. He would much rather have you as part of the family, I think. Once we tell him what has happened and explain everything, I think he will agree.”

His lips twitched into something akin to a smile, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. Elizabeth realized that he was nervous about asking her father's permission and wondered

at the cause of it. She would never dare ask him, however. Instead, she turned to a different question.

“What was your father like when you were a child?”

James' expression brightened, and he grew more animated as he spoke. “He was kind but strict. He held me to high standards and never let me fall from them.” A fond smile lit up his face. “He is the one who taught me to play chess. It was his favorite game, and, as

my mother does not care for it, he was waiting for someone to play with. He started teaching me the game when I was only four-years-old.”

“That explains why you are such an expert player.” Elizabeth laughed. He had beaten her thoroughly every time they had played, though she was learning. “He must have been a very good teacher.”

“I still don’t think I am as good as he was.” His eyes looked wistfully past her. “He was a good husband, too. I do not remember

him ever saying a sharp word to my mother.”

A moment of silence passed before he continued. “He would take me out riding. We would be gone for hours, and I would hardly notice. I felt so free.” He frowned. “There are not many good places to ride in London.”

“My father taught me to ride, too. It was one of my favorite things to do at home. On a longer ride, I would go to the seashore and ride along the waves.”

“I would like to go there with you. It

sounds like a wonderful place.”

“I cannot wait for you to see it.”

After bouts of conversation interspersed with lapses of contented silence, Elizabeth was overjoyed to see familiar countryside. “Look, there,” she said, pointing out the window.

“That is where I would ride out to the sea. You can almost see the waves.”

James leaned over her to get a better view. “Indeed, it is beautiful.” His expression

grew slack with awe. “I have been in London so long I have forgotten what the country is like.”

“You will see plenty of it while we are here. I can show you some of my favorite spots today if you wish.”

“I would enjoy that immensely!”

Not long afterward, Deuney Keep came into view. It wasn't until that moment that Elizabeth realized just how much she had

missed it. At the sight of her home, her eyes filled with tears.

Elizabeth's father waited for them outside the house, his wide smile making Elizabeth's tears spill over. She quickly dried them before getting out of the carriage and running into her father's arms.

"My dear," he said quietly, as he held her in an embrace, "it is so good to see you."

Despite all she had done to go against

him, his words were full of warmth and sincerity.

“It is good to see you too, Father.”

Composing herself, Elizabeth pulled away.

“May I introduce James Graham, the Duke of Darrington.”

James stepped forward with a charming smile and shook hands with Edward. “It is wonderful to meet you at last, sir. Your daughter has told me so much about you.”

“I am honored, Darrington,” said Edward.

“My daughter spoke very highly of you in her letter.”

Elizabeth caught a glance from James as he cast a brief look at her. “I am flattered.”

Edward gestured inside the house. “Shall we go in?”

Once they had settled in the parlor, and tea was brought in, James immediately got down to business. “Lord Waymouth, I have no

doubt you have had your suspicions since Elizabeth wrote to you. The truth is that I wish to marry her.”

Though Elizabeth was sure her father must have suspected what the visit was about, he still looked startled.

“Elizabeth’s companionship has been invaluable to me these past few weeks. She has also told me of your situation with your estate,” he said delicately. “I would like to help if I can. Deuney Keep means a lot to

Elizabeth, and I know it does to you as well.”

Edward’s expression went slack with relief. He was silent for a moment, and from knowing him so well, Elizabeth knew he was holding back tears. “I confess, Your Grace, I hardly know what to say. Your offer is too generous.”

“Not at all.” James remained perfectly at ease. “If I receive your blessing to marry Elizabeth, I will become your son, and a son does whatever he can to help his father. I am

more than happy to be of assistance.”

“Of course, I will give you my blessing, both of you.” He smiled. “I am so glad you have found someone so kind and generous, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth noted James’ shoulders relaxing with a silent sigh of relief. “Very well, then. Will three weeks before the wedding suit you? It should give us enough time to prepare.”

Elizabeth's stomach flipped. She would be married in three weeks.

“That is an excellent notion,” Edward said.

James grinned. “Thank you, my lord. I promise I will take care of your daughter.” He smiled over at Elizabeth and pressed her hand.

Edward smiled at them. “I do not doubt it,” he said softly. Elizabeth looked into his eyes and knew he was truly happy for her. “I

do not doubt it at all.”

Chapter 14

“This tree,” Elizabeth said, running a hand over the smooth bark, “is the one my friend Tom and I would always play in when we were children.”

James detected the longing and nostalgia in her voice. “Was Lady Darwin there too?”

“Oh, yes. The three of us would spend hours getting our clothes dirty and torn and then run home to be reproved by our parents.” She chuckled, then stood back and looked up

into the branches. Suddenly, she jumped up and grabbed onto a nearby branch.

James laughed at her actions. “Do you require any assistance?”

Elizabeth hauled herself up into a crook of the tree and sat, brushing leaves from her dress. “No,” she said breathlessly. “It has been many years since I have climbed this tree, but it seems I still remember how it’s done.”

“What will your father say about your

appearance?” James asked, noting how her hair was becoming frizzy and unkempt in the muggy air.

She beamed. “Nothing now that he knows we are betrothed.” She quirked her eyebrow. “Unless you will reprove me?”

James took a moment to admire her. He was far from wanting to reprove her for her appearance. Though she looked a far cry from a London society lady, she looked exactly like the Elizabeth he was coming to know so well.

Her hair blown freely by the breeze and her eyes bright in the sunlight seemed to be a perfect fit for her personality.

“If I would reprove you, it would only be for putting yourself in danger by climbing to such a height.”

Elizabeth laughed. The sound made James smile. She was so free here, untethered by any restrictions. Here, he thought, was where she truly belonged.

Shaking her head, Elizabeth said, “I am in more danger of being run over by a carriage in London than I am of falling from this tree.”

James huffed, wondering how she could speak of such things.

“If you think I am in such danger, it is a wonder you do not come up here to ensure I do not fall.”

James knew she was asking him to join her, and he eyed the branches of the tree with

suspicion. He had never climbed a tree in his life. “I think I will stay down here to catch you if you fall.”

Elizabeth giggled, no doubt discerning the true reason for his decision to keep his feet on the ground. “Very well, then.” She raised herself onto her feet and reached for a higher branch.

James’ heart leaped into his throat. “Elizabeth, wait.” He found the branch she had used to begin her climb, and, though he

was considerably taller than her, he still had to stretch to his limit to grab it. He grunted as he pulled himself up. Pain shot through his arms, as muscles that hadn't been used in years were strained.

“Do you require any assistance?” Though James couldn't see Elizabeth's face, as he lifted his legs onto the branch, he could hear the smile in her voice as she repeated his earlier words. He carefully maneuvered himself into the crook Elizabeth had occupied earlier and took deep, labored breaths. Elizabeth grinned

at him, standing on a nearby branch.

James ran a hand through his hair, feeling sweat beading on his forehead. “How on earth did you make that look so simple?”

Elizabeth shrugged. “As I told you, I have been climbing this tree my whole life.”

As James took a few moments to catch his breath, he looked out over the countryside. A field of radiant yellow caught his attention. They had walked through it on the way here,

but from this point of view, with the sun directly overhead casting its rays on the bright flowers, it looked stunning.

“I never thought the world could be so different from this vantage point,” he said softly.

“I think that few people want to see the world differently,” Elizabeth replied. “They are so stuck in their ways that they never try to find another perspective. How can one live that way when there are so many other people

who walk along with them on the earth?”

James stared at her, as she gazed out over the rolling fields. Braith had said something so similar a long time ago, he recalled. Though Elizabeth was feisty and rebellious on the outside, it was clear her mind was full of deep thoughts. Braith had been much the same, occasionally uttering concepts worthy of a philosopher.

“And that is how you live?” James asked.

“Looking at everything from a different point

of view?”

“I try.” Elizabeth met his eyes. “Imagine how dull life would be if every view, no matter how you looked at it, was the same.” She gestured over the landscape. “It is the same with people. Society dictates that we must all be the same, but we are not. Every person is different depending on how you look at them, and who is looking at them. Why should I act like someone else when I was made to be me? And why should I see people as who they are trying to be, instead of who

they are?”

James shook his head in wonder. “You are truly remarkable, Elizabeth.”

She looked away, fidgeting. “Forgive me, James. I confess that I have had no one to discuss these thoughts with in a very long time.”

“You may discuss them with me whenever you wish, without apology.” He sighed, finally starting to relax. “Braith would

always encourage me to see the world differently.”

Elizabeth didn't reply. Silence reigned while James found himself perfectly content to simply bask in nature. However, he made the mistake of looking down, and the sight of the ground several feet below made him uneasy.

“What say you,” he began, carefully shifting onto his feet, “to riding down to the sea? That is, if your father can spare a horse for me.”

“I’m sure he will be delighted to lend you a horse.” Elizabeth clambered down through the branches with ease, finally landing with her feet firmly on the ground.

James sighed, but followed her with a smile.

* * *

“You seem nervous, James,” Erin Wordsworth commented with a frown.

James took a deep breath and stilled his hand, which had been tapping out a steady rhythm on the parlor table. “I want you to like Elizabeth, Mother.”

“And you think I won’t?”

James pressed his lips together. “I know that she does not come with the glowing reputation of an accomplished lady, but I ask you to see past that to who she really is.”

Erin smiled and placed her hand over

James'. "The only opinion of her character that matters is yours, James. If she makes you happy, that is all I can ask for."

Her words eased James' qualms, if only a little. "Thank you, Mother."

The butler entered. "The Countess of Chester, Lady Isabelle Kinsley, and Lady Elizabeth Gladstone."

James frowned at the sight of the countess heading the party that entered. She

hadn't officially been invited, but James should have known she would come along with Isabelle and Elizabeth anyway.

James and Erin stood to receive them.

“Thank you for coming,” James said. He shared a wide smile with Elizabeth. “Mother,” he said as Elizabeth strode to him, “may I introduce Lady Elizabeth Gladstone?”

Elizabeth curtsayed and offered a sincere smile to Erin. “It is wonderful to meet you at last, my lady.”

“And you,” Erin said, matching Elizabeth’s smile. “I have heard so many favorable accounts about you from James. I look forward to getting to know you better.”

James breathed a silent sigh of relief. He’d had no doubt that Elizabeth would behave when meeting his mother. She had told him that she had great respect for the woman who had raised him. Nevertheless, the thought of the two of them meeting had still been nerve-racking.

“Now,” said Isabelle, once they were all seated at the parlor table, “let us begin our business. James, what do you think about the flower arrangements? I do believe that something with deep, rich colors would be best...”

He tuned Isabelle out as he watched his mother turn and quietly speak to Elizabeth. Now that he had known her well for several weeks, he could tell that Elizabeth was anxious, as she was wringing her hands in her

lap. But, once Erin had finished speaking, Elizabeth smiled, and, from the snippets of the conversation James heard, he thought she was telling his mother about their visit to Deuney Keep.

“James? Are you listening? This is very important!”

James blinked and turned his attention back to Isabelle. “Forgive me, Isabelle. I was distracted. Please continue.”

“What about roses? They are so beautiful at this time of year.”

James shook his head. “We need something brighter, like...” He glanced at Elizabeth’s shining blonde hair, done up into a neat bun, and thought of the field of yellow flowers back at Deuney Keep. “What about something yellow?”

“Yellow?” the countess repeated. “Isn’t that a bit garish?”

“Not at all.” He raised his eyebrows at Isabelle. “What do you think?”

She nodded slowly with a thoughtful frown. “I do think it might work!” She turned to Elizabeth. “Elizabeth, James is insisting on yellow flowers. What is your opinion?”

Elizabeth grinned at James. He thought she knew why he had picked yellow. “I think yellow flowers would be perfect.”

Not long after, they went to the dining

room for dinner. James was pleased that Elizabeth was once again seated next to his mother, though he grew anxious once he saw that Victoria was on her other side.

“How are you finding the wedding planning so far?” Isabelle asked Elizabeth.

“It is rather more ... involved than I thought,” she admitted. “I confess I am already exhausted.”

“The wedding day will be here before

you know it,” Erin said soothingly, smiling at Elizabeth. “When I look back now, I don’t remember the planning. I just remember how splendid everything looked, and how happy I was on my wedding day.”

Victoria nodded in agreement. “It was the very same with me, both times.” She sighed and took a sip of wine. Everyone else remained silent. James sensed that the countess had more to say. “The day itself was exquisite. I hardly remember the tiring work of planning. Perhaps I left it to my husbands?”

She laughed lightly.

“Countess, forgive me,” said Erin, “I forgot about your recent loss. I was so sorry to hear of it.”

Victoria looked sadly down at her plate, though James thought her frown looked a tad exaggerated. “Yes, it has been a terrible burden to bear. I thought I would never be over my grief the first time, and to have it happen again...” She trailed off into a long, sorrowful sigh.

Elizabeth paused with her fork halfway to her mouth and cast a disdainful glance at the Countess. James saw with relief that Isabelle and his mother did not seem to notice. Some might chide Elizabeth for being inconsiderate, but James couldn't blame her. Victoria was a consummate actress, merely speaking the words and playing at emotion rather than feeling it. He knew what it was like to lose someone, and that grief was not what he saw in Victoria's eyes.

“I understand,” Erin said, her expression softening with compassion. “My husband was the world to me. When I lost him, I hardly knew how to go on.”

“It is an unbearable feeling, isn’t it?”

Erin nodded. “Yes. And it is something that never quite leaves you.”

James thought of Braith. His father. His heart sank at the talk of death and gloominess.

“Please,” he interrupted, “may we talk of something more cheerful? We are in the midst of planning a wedding and celebrating two lives coming together. There is no need to overshadow this event with sorrow.”

“Of course, James,” Erin said quickly, shaking her head as though waking from a dream. “You are right.” She smiled, though it seemed a little sadder than it had been. “There is no need to talk of death when such love and happiness abounds!”

Yet James felt the weakness of her words.

Gloom had settled permanently over the dinner table, and James couldn't do anything to shake it.

Chapter 15

Elizabeth found herself in unusually cheerful spirits the following morning. Though there were still wedding planning to be completed, James was coming over for breakfast. For once, Victoria had other engagements and would be unable to join them.

James arrived in the dining room, smiling, with eyes only for Elizabeth. She felt herself blush under his warm gaze and looked down at her plate as an excuse to hide her face

from him.

“Good morning, Isabelle, Elizabeth.”

James took a seat next to her, across from Isabelle.

“Good morning,” Elizabeth greeted him, smiling at him, once she was sure that a blush would not give her feelings away. “My godmother has lots of ideas for wedding planning today.” Elizabeth sighed. “I hope that you are prepared.”

Isabelle shook her head. “There is still so much to be done!”

“We will be completely at your disposal today, Isabelle. I do, however, have a proposal for you for tomorrow, Elizabeth.” James shifted his body towards her. “My mother and my son, Oscar, have gone to my estate for the weekend. I was wondering if you would like us to join them there tomorrow. I would very much like you to meet them.”

Elizabeth paused and looked into his

eyes. She was sincerely flattered that he would invite her to his estate, and that he truly wanted her to spend time with his son.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said with a smile, overjoyed at the prospect of avoiding wedding planning and seeing James’ estate. “I would love to!”

“James,” chided Isabelle, “are you sure this is wise? There is still so much to be done! Leaving for a whole two days is a long break indeed!”

“We will only be gone for two days. I am sure that we will be prepared when the wedding day comes, Isabelle,” James consoled. “No matter how many times you ask me about the flowers, my answer will remain the same.”

Isabelle huffed. “You are not taking it seriously.”

James glanced at Elizabeth with a warm smile. “Trust me. I am taking our wedding very seriously. I simply do not want us to be

so caught up in preparations that we forget what the event is about in the first place.”

“I do need a reprieve, Isabelle,” Elizabeth added. “We will come back refreshed and ready to help you plan and prepare.”

Isabelle’s gaze shifted between them. “It seems I am overruled. Of course, you may go, Elizabeth.”

Elizabeth smiled at James.

“Excellent!” James said. “If it is agreeable to you, Elizabeth, I will pick you up in my carriage tomorrow morning.”

Elizabeth nodded. “I am very much looking forward to it.” She tried to imagine what James’s estate would look like. Would it be like her father’s, or larger?

And what about his son? Elizabeth couldn’t remember if he had ever told her how old he was. Would he like her? What if he didn’t? What if she didn’t like him?

Elizabeth decided that, as much as she was looking forward to the excursion, she also felt rather nervous about it.

* * *

The carriage ride was long, but Elizabeth took pleasure in seeing the unfamiliar countryside. James had told her that they were going north, up towards the Peak District. Elizabeth's father had taken her family to the area only once when she had been very young, and she didn't really remember it.

“It is breathtaking,” Elizabeth commented, as she watched the rolling fields and mountains in the distance, and clusters of woods dotting the landscape. “There must be no shortage of diversions out here. There is so much nature all around you.”

James smiled. “I thought you would like it. The landscape is a little different from your home, but there are still plenty of trees for you to climb.”

Elizabeth chuckled. “Very good. I do not think I could feel at home without a tree to climb.” Elizabeth thought about what she’d said. This countryside *would* be her home in less than three weeks.

The estate came into view from afar and James pointed it out. “There it is,” he said with a contented sigh. “I didn’t realize just how much I have missed my home until now.”

Elizabeth could already tell that James’s estate was much larger than her father’s

estate. As they drew closer, she only got a better sense of how vast the place really was. They passed through the gates and the grounds, which were beautifully landscaped. A stream ran through it, bordered by smooth stones on both sides. The grass was perfectly green, and there was a dense forest off to one side. Up ahead was the grand house, impossibly large up close. It didn't even seem like a house that someone was meant to live in.

“What do you think?” asked James.

Elizabeth could hardly think of what to say. “It is absolutely beautiful,” she declared.

James seemed pleased with her reaction. “I confess that I have spent a great deal of time designing the landscape,” he said. “I find it enjoyable and relaxing. It took me many years before I was finally happy with it.”

The carriage drew up to the house. Elizabeth was helped out onto the gravel and, as she walked forward a few steps, was glad to

stretch her legs.

“I apologize for the long journey,” James said, smoothing out his coat.

“There is no need to apologize. We are far away from London, and that is all I could have ever asked for.”

James smiled, but before he could say anything further, a small boy darted out from the house. His brown curls bounced around his forehead, as he barreled straight for

Elizabeth and wrapped his arms around her legs in the best hug he could manage at his height.

Elizabeth laughed in surprise. James' eyes widened with horror, but he joined in with a chuckle. Elizabeth patted the boy's head. "You must be Oscar. I have heard so much about you from your father!"

Oscar looked up at Elizabeth with wide, innocent eyes and asked, "Are you my new mother?"

Chapter 16

James stared at his son for several seconds, his mouth open in shock, having no idea what to say. Hadn't he taught his son any manners? To ask such a question of Elizabeth!

His cheeks burned. "Oscar," he began to reprimand him, but Elizabeth was already talking to him. She crouched down to his height and took his hand in hers. The boy was gazing at her in wonder.

"I cannot replace your mother, darling,

but I do believe we will become great friends.”

Once again, James was too stunned to say a single word, as he watched the scene play out. Oscar grinned at Elizabeth. “I’ve always wanted to have a lady for a friend!” he exclaimed, and then promptly tugged Elizabeth toward the house. Elizabeth cast a look back at James, chuckling as she allowed herself to be led away.

James found himself moved by the scene. He followed them inside and took a deep

breath of air. He had missed his home while being in the busy, crowded city of London.

The country was so different, and his home so much more spacious.

He watched Elizabeth, as they entered the house. Her mouth fell open, as they entered the foyer, revealing the impressive interior. Oscar laughed, his voice echoing throughout the chamber. “I can show you my room!”

James chuckled and took Elizabeth’s free

hand. “If you do not mind, Oscar, I think that I will show Lady Elizabeth around the house, since she has never been here. You may come with us, if you like.”

Oscar frowned. “I will go find Grandmother instead and tell her that you are here.”

James smiled. He had imagined that Oscar wouldn’t want to walk around with the adults and hear all the “boring” talk. The boy rushed off, his footsteps clapping into the

distance.

There was a moment of silence. Elizabeth turned this way and that, clasping her hands in front of her. She beamed, her eyes wide and excited.

“How do you like it so far?” asked James.

Elizabeth laughed a little. “Did you expect me to be anything but awed?”

“Well, to be completely honest, I thought

you might find it all a bit too ostentatious.”

“It is true that I cannot imagine living here,” she confessed. She reached a hand towards an elegant stair rail and glanced at James for permission. He nodded encouragingly. She laid a hand on the rail. “It seems like the sort of place you visit and only imagine the wealthy princes and kings who would live there.”

“I do not take it for granted, it is true. At least I try not to. It is a great privilege to live

in an estate like this.” He waved her forward.

“I can show you around if you would like.

Dinner will be ready for us as soon as we have finished the tour. I am sure you must be hungry after such a long journey today.”

He took Elizabeth all around the house, showing her the many rooms. She seemed especially interested in the art gallery, where James admired some of the work that he hadn't taken time to look at in a very long while.

“My friend Daniel is a great artist,” he explained, as he gazed at a beautiful painting of the mountains. “He has been kind enough to paint several landscapes I have commissioned.”

“He truly has a remarkable talent,” Elizabeth commented, next to him.

He could sense Elizabeth’s complete and total awe, as they moved on to another part of the house. About halfway through the tour he said, “I do hope that you are not too

overwhelmed.” He cleared his throat. “Not to say that you would be overwhelmed so easily...”

“I understand your meaning. And no, I am all right, but I am awestruck, James. Your home is beautiful.”

“It will be your home too, very soon.” He watched her reaction, wondering if he had said too much.

But she smiled and blushed a little. “Then

I really must pay attention, or else I shall get lost constantly!”

James laughed heartily at her humorous remark.

Erin met them halfway through the tour. Elizabeth looked delighted to see her again, and James was happy to note that his mother seemed glad to see Elizabeth as well.

“I hope your journey was pleasant?” she asked, as they walked through the vast library.

“James is always excellent company,” Elizabeth said. “Time seems to pass quickly when we converse.”

“I must say the same for you as well,” James added, with a smile.

Once they arrived back in the foyer, James could tell that Elizabeth was tired, though her excitement hadn’t diminished one bit.

“We will save the tour of the grounds for tomorrow,” he said. “For now, let us have dinner. Will you be joining us, Mother?”

“Oscar and I ate before you arrived. We were going to wait, but you know how Oscar is when he is hungry.”

James chuckled. “Yes, I know. We will see you after dinner, then.” He kissed her cheek, before guiding Elizabeth to the dining room.

They sat in silence, as the first course was served. James couldn't stop thinking about how Elizabeth had talked to Oscar earlier, and he felt he had to say something about it.

“Elizabeth, I want to thank you for how you treated Oscar when we arrived. I apologize that he was rather blunt.”

“He is a child, James. I can tell that you are training him to be a wonderful gentleman, but you cannot berate him for speaking his mind. It is what a child does.”

James smiled. “He really does behave, most of the time.” He paused. “You seem to have a natural way of relating to children,” he commented, as he continued eating.

“In a way, I wish everyone could remain as children. Though we may grow older and wiser, we should retain that same sense of hope and eagerness. We should still speak what we think instead of being trained to act like someone we are not. I like the fact that children are honest, like Oscar.”

“I understand your sentiments. Children are so easy to speak to. I think that Oscar likes you too, for the same reasons.” He hesitated, wondering if he should say his next thought aloud. “I think we will make a very happy family.”

Elizabeth was silent, and James feared that he may have said too much too soon. Then she met his gaze and smiled warmly at him. “Yes. Yes, I think we will.”

Chapter 17

“Lady Elizabeth, will you go outside with me after breakfast?”

James and Erin both smiled at Oscar’s question and looked at Elizabeth, waiting for her answer.

Elizabeth grinned at him, having only to look beside her, since he had insisted on sitting next to her at breakfast. “There is nothing that would give me greater joy!” She glanced at James. “Your father said that he

would take me around the grounds. Do you think that you would be a better guide?”

Oscar seemed to think about the question for a minute. He looked at James, then back at Elizabeth.

“Father knows the grounds better than anyone,” Oscar decided, “but I know all the best places to play.”

“Well, that is very fortunate then, because I love to play.”

Oscar's eyes lit up. James smiled at his son. "Perhaps, if you ask very nicely, she may teach you how to climb a tree."

Oscar gasped. "Will you, Lady Elizabeth? Everyone says I am a very fast learner!"

"That you are, Oscar," said Erin. "I am sure you will have no trouble, as long as Elizabeth agrees."

"Of course, I will teach you," said

Elizabeth, “but only if you can show me a good tree.”

And so it was that Oscar ate his breakfast in record time and tugged on Elizabeth’s dress, insisting that they go immediately to find a good tree to climb. When asked what the rush was, Oscar simply responded. “In case we have bad weather later!”

Elizabeth followed Oscar out of the house and marveled once again at the extensive grounds, painted golden in the morning light.

There was still a trace of mist clinging to the woods. Though Elizabeth longed to go toward the dark cluster of trees, she knew it was a little too far. She feared that she might get lost not knowing the area.

“What about this one?” Oscar asked, as they came upon a single tall tree.

Elizabeth examined it for a minute, making a show of looking it over. “The lowest branches are too high,” she observed. “See?” She reached all the way up, and there was still

a long span between her fingertips and the branch. “Even your father could not reach this branch. We must find a tree with branches that are a little lower to the ground.” She turned and surveyed the vast area, pointing to a small group of trees a little further away by the stream. “Perhaps we should try those? What do you think?”

“I like those trees,” said Oscar. “Let us see.” He led Elizabeth, pointing out a few flowers and birds whose names he knew. As they approached the trees, Elizabeth saw that

they would be much easier to climb than the last one.

“They are perfect!” said Elizabeth. She noted that the low branches were only a few feet off the ground, which was ideal for Oscar. The boy grinned and immediately jumped onto the lowest branch, reaching up for the next one.

“Be careful!” Elizabeth laughed. “The most important thing about climbing a tree is to make sure that every step is certain. The

goal is not to be hasty, but to be safe. As long as you take your time, you will not fall.”

Oscar paused and looked at her over his shoulder. “If I were to fall, would you catch me?”

“Of course, I would. I will be right here all the while. Can you reach that next branch?” Elizabeth instructed him and helped him climb until he was on a branch above her.

“I am taller than you, Lady Elizabeth!”

Oscar exclaimed triumphantly, standing on the branch with his feet planted.

“Be careful, Oscar,” Elizabeth warned.

“And if you like, you may call me Elizabeth since we are friends now.”

Oscar’s eyes widened. “I don’t know if Father would like that.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Your father calls me by my Christian name, as well.”

Oscar frowned in thought. “It must be all right then. May I go higher, Elizabeth?”

“Only a little.” She paused, watching as he got higher and higher. “Are you not afraid?”

“Why should I be?” he asked. “You are there to catch me.”

Elizabeth’s heart warmed at the boy’s faith in her. “Yes, you are in no danger. Perhaps though, you should stop there.

Another important part of climbing a tree is knowing when the branches become too thin for you to climb on.”

Oscar reached up and tugged on the branch above him. It bent underneath the force. Oscar nodded. “Yes, I think you are right.”

“Now would you like to come down, or shall I come up there with you?”

Oscar grinned. “Join me, Elizabeth!” He

giggled. “I have never seen the house from this high before. It is so beautiful!”

Elizabeth climbed up to Oscar’s height in half the time it had taken him. He was right. The height provided a complete and perfect view of the house and the grounds. “You live in a beautiful place, Oscar,” Elizabeth said. “Do you like it better here or in London?”

Oscar hummed, making a thinking face that reminded Elizabeth of James. “I like playing outside here,” Oscar said, “but there is

more to do in London. Father takes me to
plays sometimes, or we go on carriage rides!”

“Has your father taught you chess?”

Oscar shook his head. “Not yet. He says I
am too young to understand it.”

“He does know the game best. But,”
Elizabeth whispered, like a secret, “I think that
you are a very clever boy.”

“Really?” He grinned.

“Look at you. You climbed the tree perfectly! You are even better than your father was when he climbed a tree back near my home.”

“Father climbed a tree?” Oscar laughed.

“Oh, yes.” The boy’s laughter was contagious, and Elizabeth couldn’t help but join in. “He was quite frightened!”

Oscar’s laughter only increased. Elizabeth

couldn't help but take a moment to appreciate how like his father he was. She had a fleeting thought, wondering what her future children with James would look like. Would they have the same curly hair as Oscar? She hoped so. But the thought made her blush, so she looked away and gazed out over the grounds again.

Eventually, James met them and informed them that they were to have a picnic lunch on the grounds. James grinned at his son, who was practically buzzing with excitement.

“It seems you have been having great fun with Elizabeth?”

“Yes, Father! I climbed a tree and wasn’t scared! You can see into the woods from up there!”

“You will have to show me later on,” said James, “though I confess that I am not a very good tree climber. Elizabeth knows.”

Elizabeth smiled. “Yes, I do. I told Oscar

that he is better than you are!”

James laughed. “Sometimes I think that my son is much cleverer than I am.”

Elizabeth loved seeing James interact with Oscar. His demeanor was so much softer, and he always smiled at him. She could tell he loved him very deeply.

Once the picnic was laid out, Erin joined them, and they all laughed and talked as they ate. Elizabeth felt refreshed and full of joy,

much more at home here than she had ever been in London or, indeed, even at Deuney Keep.

After the picnic, Elizabeth wandered down to the stream that trickled through the grounds. It was a wider section, too far for her to jump across. She stooped down and watched the clear stream trickling by, reaching out to dip her fingers in the cool water. Just as she leaned over, her foot slid on the pebbles that lined the edges of the stream, and she cried out involuntarily as she fell

forward. A strong arm came around her waist and quickly pulled her back from the water.

James looked down at her, still holding her close. “Are you all right?”

Elizabeth, still breathing heavily from the shock, took a moment to reply. “Yes, I am fine. Thank you.” She looked into his eyes, so close, and found herself breathless. It took several seconds for James to release her, and when he did, he laughed. Elizabeth laughed as well, despite herself.

She thought that if she had to pick one perfect day out of her whole life, it would be today.

Chapter 18

The next day, James was disheartened that they were going back to London. He could see how Elizabeth came alive away from the confines of the city. With people like his family surrounding her, she seemed to be at her very brightest. He almost considered delaying their journey by another day, certain that Elizabeth would agree to the idea, but he knew that they had to continue with their wedding planning.

Oscar was especially sad that Elizabeth

was leaving, and he made her promise that she would visit him when he was back in London. Elizabeth seemed just as bereft, and she gave Oscar a long hug before James helped her up into the carriage. Oscar waved after them, and James was moved when he saw tears on the boy's face. He couldn't blame him. It had been a wonderful weekend for all of them, filled with love and joy.

As the carriage started away from the estate, Elizabeth sighed. "You must miss this so much when you are in London."

“I do. It is a little more bearable, because I have Oscar and my mother with me in London most of the time.” He smiled over at her. “Once we are married, we will have to take trips here often.”

Elizabeth smiled. “I would like that.”

“Is there anywhere else you’d like to go?” James asked. “You’ve told me that you haven’t been to many places, but that you often dream of traveling.”

Elizabeth gazed out of the window and seemed to think it over. “I would like to see Paris,” she said wistfully. “My mother used to tell me stories about it. She said it was like London, but better.”

“It is a nice city,” James said. “I went there with my father twice, but I would like to visit again with you. Perhaps I can arrange for a trip after the wedding.”

Elizabeth’s expression lit up with

excitement. “That would be wonderful!” She paused and shook her head. “It is incredible to think that we will be married in less than a few weeks.”

James couldn’t quite discern her tone.

“How do you feel about it?”

“I am...” She seemed to struggle with words for a moment. “I am glad to be marrying you, James.” She huffed a short laugh. “With the way my father has tried to marry me off, I never thought I would be

married to someone so kind.”

James’s heart warmed at her statement.

“I’m glad. I know that the way I proposed was rather hasty. Sometimes I fear that you have been forced into this.”

Elizabeth placed a comforting hand on his, looking straight into his eyes. “There is no need to worry, James. I made a choice to accept your proposal, and I have never once regretted it.” She smiled. “As you said, we will make a very happy family.”

He found no trace of deception in her face. Elizabeth was truly happy with him.

* * *

Several hours later, they arrived back at Isabelle's house. As they entered the drawing room, Isabelle stood and smiled, thrilled see them. Victoria stood as well, a tight smile on her face.

“It's wonderful that you are back,” the countess said. “Isabelle told me that you took

a trip to your estate, James?”

James sighed silently. He hadn't planned on meeting Victoria when they arrived back in London. She had completely spoiled his joyous mood. “Yes, I wanted to show Elizabeth my estate and allow her to spend some time with my mother and Oscar.”

“The poor child,” sighed the countess, “growing up without a mother. It is so tragic. I know you look after him well, James, but a son needs a mother as he's growing older. I

know that your mother is such a comfort to you even now. I hate to think about how Oscar misses someone like that in his life.”

James had harbored the same thoughts many times. His spirit plummeted as he thought of Braith and how much Oscar had missed her when she had first passed away.

“Oscar is a perfectly wonderful boy,” Elizabeth interjected. “James is doing a fine job of raising him into a young gentleman.” She glanced at James briefly, who mustered a

smile in response. “It is a shame that you never had any children, Countess, with either of your husbands.”

James was relieved that Elizabeth had driven the conversation away from him. Once again, he had her to thank her for speaking on his behalf.

The countess frowned at Elizabeth’s statement. “It was my husbands’ fault, not mine, but it matters little, since they are no longer here.”

James thought it was a rather odd response, but he didn't ponder it much further, as Isabelle invited them into the parlor for tea and pressed James to stay for dinner. He accepted, knowing that if he ate dinner at home, he'd be alone.

Already, James had noticed that Elizabeth seemed different to the way she had at the estate. She hardly tried to remain civil towards the countess and made sarcastic replies to her godmother. He could see how

the wedding planning was weighing down on her. He remembered how she had been with Oscar, so carefree, as though that had been the real version of Elizabeth.

James smiled over at her during dinner, thinking to himself that Elizabeth was just the mother that Oscar needed.

Before James left that night, he was able to speak to Elizabeth privately for a few brief moments.

“I must thank you for the way that you handled Victoria’s comment about Oscar earlier. It is a difficult subject for me. I have worried many times that the lack of a mother will affect him.”

“I know. I remember you speaking of it the first night that I met you. But the countess is wrong, James. You are a wonderful parent to Oscar, and soon I will be by your side to help you whenever you need it.”

James clasped her hand briefly and

pressed it. “You are already helping me,
Elizabeth, in more ways than you know.”

Elizabeth returned the gentle pressure on
his hand. “Thank you for our visit to your
estate,” she said. “I had a wonderful time.”

“So did I, and both Oscar and Mother
wished that you could stay longer. I do not
think they cared very much about me.”

They both laughed, and James said his
goodbyes. He realized that he couldn’t wait for

the day that he never had to leave her.

Chapter 19

One week later, Elizabeth was wishing that the wedding could be brought forward, simply so that they would not have to do any more planning. She was tired of guest lists, flower arrangements, cakes, and everything else. She didn't understand why it all had to be so meticulous or why everyone had to be so involved.

“What about the Boyles, James?” Victoria asked, as they all sat in Isabelle's library. The countess had taken it upon herself to write

down any guests they had forgotten in previous planning, because she claimed she had nearly perfect penmanship.

Isabelle gasped. “Victoria, you are right! It is a wonder we have forgotten them!”

James sighed. “I barely know them. They are acquaintances only.”

Elizabeth felt for James being constantly harassed in such a manner, but her own opinion on who should be included as guests

was seldom sought, because she wasn't familiar with London society. James had responded in the same way repeatedly, but still Isabelle and the countess seemed to come up with ever more names for him to include.

“Were they at your previous wedding? Weren't they particular friends of Braith?” Victoria asked.

Isabelle nodded. “Yes, I believe they were!”

Elizabeth watched a cloud of sorrow pass over James' countenance. She glared at the countess, but she didn't catch the look. After their conversation in the garden that afternoon, the countess had seemed determined to bring up Braith as often as possible, and it always put James in a dismal mood.

“Write them down,” Elizabeth said, “and we can always change our minds later.”

James gave Elizabeth a thankful look, but

she could see the hurt in his eyes. She crossed the room to sit next to him on the sofa. “We can always take a reprieve,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” James sighed, the weariness in his voice almost tangible. “I think that would be best. Let us put this off for a little while longer.” He smiled. “How about a game of chess, Elizabeth?”

The countess audibly sighed. “How you can continue playing that game time and time again, I don’t know. It was a favorite of

Charles', too. I never understood the appeal."

She frowned as if thinking. "Come to think of it, George played the game as well. I could never stand it for more than a few minutes."

Elizabeth noted, not for the first time, that she spoke of her two late husbands so flippantly. The exception had been during dinner at James' house, when she had seemed to purposefully act sorrowfully when speaking of them. Other than that, she made them sound like no more than acquaintances.

“Elizabeth?” James pressed.

“Oh—yes!” She blinked and met James’ eyes with a smile. “I would like a game of chess very much.”

“I will make it easy for you this time,” he teased, a gleam in his eyes.

“Good,” said Elizabeth. “This will be the time when I finally win.” But despite her words, she knew she would not be able to focus on the game. Her thoughts were too

preoccupied with what the countess had said.

After James had once again won their chess game, the wedding planning continued until night fell. James and Victoria said their goodbyes, leaving only Elizabeth and Lady Kinsley for dinner.

Ever since the countess had spoken of her husbands, Elizabeth hadn't stopped wondering about them. As they sat in companionable silence at dinner, Elizabeth brought up the subject.

“Lady Kinsley, I have heard the countess speak of her late husbands, and I found myself curious about how they died.”

Lady Kinsley continued eating, as unaffected by the subject as Victoria had been. “I believe they both died of heart failure.” She sighed. “It is sad—such a common thing now.”

Elizabeth had almost hoped that her godmother’s answer would quell her suspicions, but instead she found them stoked.

Both of them died of the same thing?

* * *

The next day, Elizabeth went to Felicia's house. Her excuse to Lady Kinsley was that she needed a break from wedding planning, but in reality, she wanted to investigate the Countess' character, and she knew Felicia would help her.

Felicia was overjoyed to see her friend.
“Elizabeth! Oh, I have so much to tell you!”

Elizabeth suddenly realized that she hadn't seen Felicia since she had come to visit her when she had been ill, and that had been only briefly. Elizabeth had been too tired for conversation.

“I am so glad you are feeling better,” Felicia continued. “But tell me, how was your visit to Deuney Keep?”

“James enjoyed the country as much as I do, and my father gave us his blessing without hesitation.”

Felicia beamed. “That is wonderful news!
And how is the wedding planning?”

Elizabeth sighed and fell dramatically
into a chair across from Felicia. “It is
exhausting! I don’t want to speak of it
anymore. What did you want to tell me?”

Felicia fidgeted, her cheeks turning a
bright pink. “I danced with the Earl of
Presport at the ball.”

Elizabeth sat up. “The Earl of Presport?

Why did you not tell me this sooner?”

“I knew you were too weary to speak when you were ill, and I did not want to bother you while you were busy planning your wedding!” Felicia pressed her lips together apologetically.

Elizabeth huffed. “Felicia, I would not have been in the slightest bit bothered! I can tell that you like him.”

A smile formed unbidden on Felicia's lips. She laughed a little nervously. "Like him? Elizabeth, I wish you could have met him. He was so...so kind. We spoke of philosophy and art, and he was so knowledgeable. Any book that I referenced, he could quote from it from memory."

Elizabeth smiled, overjoyed for her friend. "He sounds like a perfect match for you, indeed!"

Felicia sighed, and her lips twitched, as

though she was trying to control her smile. “It was only one dance and one night of conversation, but I have heard he will be at the dinner at Wellington Castle. Has James been invited?”

Elizabeth recalled James mentioning it to her. “Yes, I believe he has.”

“Wonderful! You will be able to meet him!”

“I look forward to it.” Elizabeth leaned forward to take her friend’s hand. “I am very

happy for you, Felicia. Please tell me if anything else comes of this, even if it is on my wedding day. I want to know!”

Felicia giggled. “I doubt you would hear me on your wedding day. You would only have eyes for your dear duke!”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “I have told you before. We are friends only.”

“And yet, I see the way you look when you talk about him.” Felicia paused, looking

into Elizabeth's eyes. "I have no doubt he looks the same way when he speaks of you. But I will determine it for certain at the dinner!"

Elizabeth sighed but let it pass, almost fearing that Felicia was right. What would it mean if she really were in love with James, and he with her?

To distract herself, Elizabeth unveiled her real reason for coming. She told Felicia of the countess' behavior when she spoke of her

deceased husbands.

“I want to know more about the Countess of Chester,” she told her. “I believe there is more to her than it seems.”

“Elizabeth,” Felicia chided with a frown. “Gossip cannot tell you about someone’s character.”

“No, but I believe I already know her character. I simply want it to be confirmed.”

Though still reluctant, Felicia admitted that she had wanted to take a walk through the city anyway. They went out into the London streets into the rather mild and cloudy day. Elizabeth missed the sunshine, but the overcast sky seemed rather fitting for their errand.

They walked to a fashionable dress shop, where Felicia was happy to look at the fabrics and point out her favorites to Elizabeth. Elizabeth tried to pay attention to her friend but remained in her own world. She wanted to

know more about the countess, but she wasn't quite sure how to go about it. Surely someone of her status was talked about often, especially if there was something scandalous about her reputation.

“Dear Felicia, is that you?”

Elizabeth and Felicia both turned at the sound of the overly excited voice. Two girls with wavy brown hair and colorful dresses stood behind them, smiling.

Felicia grinned. “Oh, how wonderful! Elizabeth, may I introduce you to Hannah and Clarice Nott. We became acquainted at the ball.”

“Felicia has told us about you, Lady Elizabeth” Hannah said. “It is a pleasure to meet you.”

“Is it true you are to marry the Duke of Darrington?” Clarice asked, buzzing with excitement. Hannah gave her a reproachful look.

“I am to marry the Duke,” Elizabeth replied, with a chuckle, finding their enthusiasm amusing. “It is no secret.”

Felicia laughed. “It is said that Hannah and Clarice know everyone in London.”

“We simply listen,” said Hannah modestly.

Everyone in London, thought Elizabeth.

“Tell me, do you know anything about the

Countess of Chester?”

Clarice’s eyes grew wide. “We know many things about her!”

“There is lots of gossip about the countess,” Hannah interjected, “and not all of it is true. However, we do know a few stories.”

“Tell me.” Elizabeth was so eager that she raised her voice, then quickly realized her error and spoke in a softer tone. “If you wish.”

“It happened at a dinner at Windsor Castle,” Clarice began. “There were many important people invited, including the Earl and Countess of Chester. It is said,” she continued, lowering her voice, “that the countess was escorted from the dinner after she made inappropriate advances to a duke.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. Though it sounded rather outrageous, she could easily picture the countess being guilty of such a thing.

“Surely it is just gossip,” said Felicia placidly.

Elizabeth doubted it but didn’t contradict her friend. Felicia tried to see the good in everyone, even though in some people, like the countess, it seemed there was no goodness at all.

Elizabeth considered the countess’s nature. Jealous, obsessive, prideful. Dangerous? Perhaps.

Chapter 20

“Have you ever seen Wellington Castle?”

James asked. In the twilight, he could barely see Elizabeth’s expression beside him.

“I do not think I’ve ever been to a castle,” said Elizabeth, with a small laugh. “Not one that people live in, anyway.” The carriage jolted, and Elizabeth jumped, her hand landing on top of his. She met his eyes and shied away, but James took her hand and smiled. This had been happening more of late, accidental, innocent touches that seemed to

make them both a little less sure and a little more desperate.

James thought he could just make out the silhouette of the castle in the distance. “Be prepared for something truly wonderful. It is a magnificent sight.”

Elizabeth followed his gaze, squinting. “I think I can just see it.”

“We are not far now.” He raised his eyebrows and squeezed her hand. “Are you

nervous?”

“Should I be nervous?” she countered, in a lighthearted tone.

James smiled. “No, of course not. You are destined to charm anyone you meet.”

Elizabeth laughed. “You know that is not true.”

“If they refuse to see who you are, then the fault is their own. Unless, of course, you

eat with the wrong fork at dinner.”

The peals of Elizabeth’s laughter rang out, making James unable to do anything but join in.

“I am past that, I think,” Elizabeth said as she regained her breath. Looking at her, James couldn’t tell if she was embarrassed by her past offense or proud of it. “I would not damage your reputation in that way.”

James wondered if that was the sole

reason that she had been so much tamer since they had been engaged. “Do you feel restricted, being engaged to a duke?”

Slowly, Elizabeth shook her head. “No. In the past, I have acted rashly to show people that I have no intention of being someone I am not. But you already know that; therefore, I have no need.”

“Yes,” James chuckled. “I know that you will be honest and true, no matter what company you are in.” And it was that rare

quality, James thought, that endeared her to him the most.

Their carriage arrived at the castle among several others. As they stepped out, Elizabeth smoothed her dress and patted her hair. “How do I look?”

She wore an emerald green gown, with her hair done up intricately. Her silk gloves were sleek and elegant, though Elizabeth kept tugging at them as if expecting them to fall off.

“Beautiful,” James said honestly.

Elizabeth looked down, as a blush tinged her cheeks.

James kept an eye on Elizabeth, as they filed in with the rest of the guests. She seemed perfectly at ease, but he still remembered how she had been so overwhelmed at that first ball. He briefly grasped her fingers and pressed them before letting go. Elizabeth offered him a soft smile.

Once they were inside, several people came up to James to talk. He introduced Elizabeth to several dukes, earls, and other notable members of society. While Elizabeth maintained proper decorum, she was still honest with her speech. James could tell that many of the people he introduced her to found it amusing and refreshing.

“Felicia!” Elizabeth rushed away from James when she saw her friend, who had two others with her. She chatted excitedly with them for a moment, before walking back to

him with a wide grin. “Felicia introduced me to Hannah and Clarice Nott only a few days ago,” she explained. “I am surprised to find there are such nice people here. I normally do not care for people.”

James shook his head but smiled. “I have met Miss Hannah Nott before, but not her sister. They are quite merry companions, are they not?”

Elizabeth replied in the affirmative and began to tell him something about her friend

Felicia, but suddenly James found himself entirely captivated by the eager look in her eyes and the permanent smile upon her lips. He noticed a stray lock of hair that had fallen out of place in her animated movements, and before he could stop himself, he gently brushed his fingers along her cheek to guide the hair back into place.

Elizabeth stopped talking mid-sentence. She met his eyes with a look of awareness. At that moment, James knew that she felt the same way about him that he did about her.

He became aware of people watching them, and dropped his hand. He thought with a hint of amusement that now *he* was the one breaking the rules of etiquette. He smiled at Elizabeth, and she smiled back at him.

“Forgive me, Elizabeth. You were telling me something about Lady Darwin?”

“Yes..., yes,” she stuttered, blinking rapidly. She lowered her voice. “Felicia told me that she danced with the Earl of Presport

at the last ball. Do you know him?”

James nodded, beginning to scan the crowd for the familiar face. “Yes, he is an old friend of mine.”

“Felicia was quite taken with him, and I wanted to meet him to discern his character. Although if you say he is a friend of yours, I cannot see that he would be anything but kind and honorable.”

“Do you really trust me so much?”

Elizabeth took his arm. “I do.”

A comforting warmth spread through James at her words. He knew then that he wanted to be worthy of her trust no matter what.

“Ah!” He spotted the familiar reddish-brown hair of Daniel, the Earl of Presport. “I have spotted him. I shall introduce you.”

“May we bring Felicia with us?”

Elizabeth asked. "I know she is nervous, and I do not know if she will speak to the earl on her own."

"Of course."

Elizabeth went off and soon brought Felicia back with her. James greeted Felicia as he would a close friend, because he knew she meant the world to Elizabeth.

"It is so good to see you again, Lady Darwin," he said. "Elizabeth has told me how

valuable your friendship is to her.”

“And she has told me much about you as well, my lord.”

“The Earl of Presport is an old friend of mine, and Elizabeth tells me that you are acquainted with him. I was just about to introduce Elizabeth. Would you care to join us?”

Felicia agreed, though James could tell she was anxious. As they approached the earl,

he caught James' eye and smiled.

“James! It has been such a long time since I have seen you!”

“And I, you, Daniel. May I introduce Lady Elizabeth Gladstone?”

Daniel bowed to Elizabeth with a smile.

“So, you are the young lady I have heard so much about. Good things, certainly,” he added quickly. His gaze turned to Felicia, and his eyes softened.

“I believe you are already acquainted with Lady Darwin?” James asked.

“Indeed, we met at a ball only a week or so ago.” He bowed. “It is wonderful to see you again, Lady Darwin.”

“And you, my lord,” she said, with a curtsy.

“James,” said Elizabeth, “I believe Miss Hannah Nott is calling us over there.” She

insistently tugged on James' arm and cast a grin at Felicia.

James laughed as Elizabeth led him away. "You would abandon your friend?"

"For her own good. She is much too shy to request to speak to the earl privately."

Just then, everyone started to file into the dining hall. James caught the look of wonder on Elizabeth's face as they stepped into the grand chamber, which was spacious

enough to seat the large party of people with ease.

“Good heavens,” she breathed, looking up at the vaulted ceilings.

James smiled, amused at her wonderment. They were seated next to one another at the table, and, just across from them sat Felicia, the Earl of Presport beside her, due to some fortunate act of Providence. James noted that they were already deep in conversation and smiled to himself. From

what he knew of Felicia, she would be a good match for Daniel.

Elizabeth was also watching them and smiling. As the courses were served, they talked idly and conversed with those around them. Elizabeth was true to her word and ate with decorum.

As they walked back out to the carriage after the evening was over, Elizabeth leaned on James' arm. She blinked wearily.

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “It was a wonderful evening.”

James smiled, thinking of how he had touched her cheek earlier. “It had nothing to do with me. I am glad, however, to see your friend happy.”

“Yes, so am I. Only I meant—” Her words were cut off when they reached the carriage. When they were both settled inside, James opened his mouth to ask her what she had started to say, but Elizabeth leaned her head

back and closed her eyes.

The whole way back, James listened to the sound of Elizabeth's even breathing and contemplated what it would mean if they were in love with each other.

Chapter 21

Once again, Elizabeth was enjoying a short reprieve from wedding planning, as she sat at tea with Felicia, Hannah, and Clarice. She found their company refreshing after the demands of her godmother and the Countess of Chester.

“Felicia has told us that you grew up together,” said Hannah to Elizabeth.

“Yes,” Elizabeth said. “We have been friends ever since I was four-years-old.”

“Elizabeth would always get me into trouble when we were children,” added Felicia.

Hannah and Clarice laughed.

“You agreed to get into trouble with me,” amended Elizabeth with a giggle. “That is not my fault.”

“Do you remember when you tried to teach yourself how to ride a horse when you

were six, and forced me to come with you?”

Elizabeth had to set down her tea because of she was laughing so hard. “We barely avoided being kicked!”

“We could very well have died!” Felicia explained to Hannah and Clarice.

“It was Tom’s schemes that were always the dangerous ones,” Elizabeth corrected.

“Tom?” asked Clarice.

Elizabeth wondered at the burning curiosity in her voice. It became even stranger when Hannah immediately cast a warning glance at her sister.

Felicia, seemingly oblivious to the odd behavior, simply sighed and shook her head. “Tom Stapleton. He was our friend too, and Elizabeth is right. He would get us both into the most trouble!”

Clarice, ignoring further looks from

Hannah, stared at Elizabeth. “Are the rumors true, then?”

“Clarice!” Hannah hissed harshly.

Elizabeth frowned. “What rumors?”

“Just rumors,” Hannah said quickly.

“There is no need to concern yourself.”

“A rumor about me?” An uneasy feeling settled in Elizabeth’s stomach. “If there is one, I would like to know about it.”

Hannah and Clarice shared a long look. Finally, Hannah nodded and looked sadly at Elizabeth. “There are rumors about you and a boy named Tom when you lived in Deuney Keep.”

Elizabeth could feel Clarice and Felicia’s eyes on her, but she only looked at Hannah, dreading what she was about to say. “What kind of rumor?”

Hannah looked down and wrung her

hands. “I never believed it was true—”

“What rumor?” Elizabeth pressed, raising her voice.

“A rumor of, forgive me, impropriety with Tom...”

“Impropriety!”

Hannah wouldn’t meet her eyes. “I’m afraid it is even worse than that.”

Unable to believe what she was hearing, Elizabeth immediately stood and paced across the room. Her three friends were silent.

“This is ridiculous! Of course, it is not true!” She locked eyes with Clarice, who was watching her. “From whom did you hear it?”

Clarice stared with her mouth open for a moment, before stuttering, “Lady...,Lady Fletcher! I overheard her talking about it to someone else.”

Lady Fletcher. The name rang a bell.

Wasn't she one of the countess' friends?

Then it hit her. *Had James heard?*

Elizabeth felt she could hardly catch her breath, as she strode back to the table. "Is this rumor being widely circulated?"

"Unfortunately, yes." Hannah frowned.

"When someone spoke of it to me, I tried to put in a word for your good character, but the gossip has already been spread."

Elizabeth felt as if her entire world was suddenly turning upside down. An accusation of that magnitude could have disastrous consequences. Even if it were proven untrue, the damage to her reputation would already be done.

“I am sorry,” she breathed, collecting her things, “but I must leave.”

Felicia stood. “Elizabeth—”

But Elizabeth didn't want comfort. She needed to think this through. She shook her head. "I need to be alone. I will call on you tomorrow." She saw herself out and paused for a moment, as she emerged onto the streets of London. People passed by. Some eyes met hers. Had they heard the terrible gossip?

She started on her way home, her thoughts swirling. She stared at the ground and avoided everyone's eyes. The worst possible gossip was circulating about *her*. It couldn't be true. It just couldn't.

Trying to calm her thoughts, Elizabeth considered it logically. James knew her. He wouldn't believe the rumor even if he did hear it. Would he? He had to know she wouldn't do such a thing.

Finally, Elizabeth arrived at Lady Kinsley's house. As she entered in a flurry, she noticed the very last person she wanted to see, the countess.

“Elizabeth,” the countess said, jumping a

little as Elizabeth stormed through the front door. “We didn’t expect you home this early. Isabelle went out briefly, but she should be back at any moment.”

Elizabeth couldn’t even process her words. She huffed, tearing off her bonnet and her gloves. She clenched her hands into fists and turned to go up the stairs to her room without even greeting the countess.

Suddenly, the countess was in her way. For once, her stare of hatred wasn’t hidden.

She glared at Elizabeth and crossed her arms over her chest.

“I knew I was right about you,” she said, with a sneer. “You are wild and uncontrollable. James thinks you’re like his late wife, but I know better. You may look a little like her, but you have no class or sophistication. You cannot hide it forever, and it is only a matter of time before James sees it too.”

Rage and sorrow boiled inside of

Elizabeth. “You are the one with no class or sophistication, running after James as though he is some sort of prize and insulting me, though I have done nothing wrong.” She pushed the countess out of the way and ran up the stairs. “Leave me be!”

She got to her room out of breath, slammed the door, and fell onto the floor in a heap. She let out bottled up tears of frustration. Just yesterday everything had been picture-perfect, but now she was starting to hate London.

Chapter 22

James was instantly on the alert when he entered Isabelle's dining room. Though he was accustomed to Elizabeth looking up at him with a smile every time they met, now she barely raised her eyes. Her smile was only half-formed. She looked pale, and her form was a little slumped.

“Elizabeth! Are you ill again?” he asked, coming to sit beside her.

Elizabeth shook her head. “No. I had a

trying day yesterday. That is all.” Her expression lightened. “I am already feeling better now that you are here.”

James smiled at the compliment and turned his attention to his friend across the table, noting she had been rather quiet. “How are you this morning, Isabelle?”

“I am doing fairly well.” She pushed food around on her plate. “Elizabeth told me you had plans to go to the Royal Armories today?”

“Yes, I’m very much looking forward to it. When Elizabeth told me that she had never been to the Tower of London, I knew we had to go.” He smiled over at Elizabeth, but once again she didn’t quite meet his gaze.

James’ enthusiasm ebbed. He was getting the feeling something was going on that no one was telling him about.

As he and Elizabeth were about to leave, Isabelle pulled him aside while Elizabeth collected her bonnet and her gloves. “James,”

she whispered, though no one else was in the room. “I heard something very disturbing while I was out yesterday, and Victoria corroborated the story when I returned.”

James frowned. “Yes?”

Isabelle pressed her lips together, looking sincerely troubled. “I have heard some terrible talk about Elizabeth.”

“About Elizabeth?” he repeated. “Surely it is nothing more than criticisms of her

normal character?”

“This is something different altogether.”

She glanced over as Elizabeth came down the stairs and turned back to James shaking her head. “Elizabeth has been very troubled. We will speak later.”

Elizabeth barely forced a smile on meeting James at the door. He longed to ask Isabelle what she meant, but she was already turning away, and the door was opened for them. He led Elizabeth out to his carriage and

helped her inside.

“Are you sure you are well enough to go out today?” he asked, noting that she still didn’t look well at all.

“Yes, I am perfectly well. I promise you.”

“What happened yesterday that has affected you so?”

As the carriage started forward, Elizabeth wouldn’t tear her gaze away from the window.

“I became aware of a rumor that has been spreading about me all throughout London.”

“People will talk and say things that are unkind.” James placed his hand on top of hers. “It’s not every day that a duke is engaged to a lady from the country.”

Elizabeth sighed. “This is different, but it is no matter. I am trying not to let it trouble me.”

James squeezed her hand. “Good.” He

wanted to ask her how she had enjoyed her time with her friends yesterday but decided that talking of events from the previous day would probably not cheer her up. Elizabeth seemed more troubled than he had ever seen her.

The short journey was spent mostly in silence, and James was content to give Elizabeth some space. They soon arrived at the Tower of London and stepped out of the carriage. Elizabeth's loose hair fluttered about her head in the breeze blowing off the

Thames.

“What do you think?” asked James,
gazing at the ancient building.

Elizabeth fought to keep her hair out of
her eyes. “I will tell you once I can see.”

James chuckled and carefully pushed
some of her hair to the side. Elizabeth beamed
at him, the first real smile he had seen all day.
However, it faded in a moment. James
followed her gaze and saw a lord and lady

they had spoken with at the ball eyeing Elizabeth and whispering as they walked by.

“Pay them no heed. Come.” He offered her his arm and led her towards the entrance of the tower. Elizabeth’s expression grew thoughtful as they approached.

“It is such a magnificent place, but it has such a gruesome history.”

James nodded. “That is all behind us now. I believe that you will find the display

most interesting. It is called the Line of Kings.”

As they stepped inside the old tower,
Elizabeth wrinkled her nose. “It smells old.”

James chuckled, finding himself more at
ease at the sound of her normal
lightheartedness. “That is because it is old.”

They encountered only a few people once
inside. James didn’t recognize any of the faces,
but there were a couple of young ladies who
seemed to recognize him. Though they never

addressed him directly, he heard them talking once he and Elizabeth had passed by. A woman who was with them, perhaps their governess, chided them. And yet they continued.

James found himself unable to concentrate on the display. Then came the moment where he caught one of their whispers and heard them say Elizabeth's name.

He suddenly realized that they didn't

know him. They were gossiping about Elizabeth.

James felt a flare of anger. Beside him, Elizabeth's eyes were downcast. *This is becoming ridiculous*, he thought. He turned to the young ladies. "Ladies, if you please, do not speak of things you know nothing about."

Elizabeth turned to him, shocked. "James —"

He shook his head. He wanted to get to

the bottom of this. “I think it’s time we were leaving, Elizabeth.”

He guided her back outside, and, fortunately, didn’t run into anyone else on the way to the carriage. He instructed the driver to take them back to Isabelle’s house. He wasn’t sure that he or Elizabeth could stomach being out anymore.

This time, the carriage ride was utterly silent. James was torn between wanting to ask more about the rumors and leaving Elizabeth

alone to her thoughts. He began to wonder if perhaps the reason that she was so silent was that this rumor, whatever it was, was true.

But what could it possibly be?

They arrived back at Isabelle's house and entered the sitting room to find that the countess had arrived.

"I did not expect you to be back so soon!" Isabelle said. "Did you enjoy the exhibit?"

“I wanted to enjoy it, but I was rather distracted,” Elizabeth sighed, walking away from James. “Excuse me. I will rejoin you in a few minutes.” She went up the stairs silently.

James looked to Isabelle, who looked helpless as she watched Elizabeth’s progress. “I’d better make sure she is all right.” She followed Elizabeth up the stairs.

James sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He had been looking forward to today,

but it was turning into a nightmare right before his eyes.

“James? You and Elizabeth don’t seem quite yourselves today. What has happened?”

James had almost forgotten the presence of the countess. Still, with confusion and frustration building up inside of him, he couldn’t help but let some of it out.

“There is some sort of rumor following Elizabeth,” he said, collapsing into a chair. He

shifted, unable to find a comfortable position.

“I did not realize how serious it was until we went out today.”

“Yes,” mused the countess, taking a seat beside him, “it is a very serious accusation indeed.”

James frowned. “I was speaking of how widely it has been circulated. What is the accusation?”

The countess raised her eyebrows in

surprise. “You mean that you do not know?”

“No. Elizabeth seemed too troubled for me to ask her about it. I did not wish to cause her any more distress.”

The countess settled into her chair and looked down, toying with one of her rings. “I did not want to be the one to tell you this...”

James huffed. “Tell me, Victoria. Do not trifle with me.”

“Very well.” She met James’ eyes. “There has been a rumor that Elizabeth has been, to put it delicately ... ruined. It seems that she and a boy named Tom created quite the scandal back in Deuney Keep. Elizabeth’s father has wanted to get her married off quickly so that it can all be hushed up.”

James stared at the countess.

“Elizabeth?” he murmured. “No...” And yet hadn’t she spoken to him about her friend Tom? Hadn’t she told him how they had gotten in trouble?

He stood and crossed over to the window, looking out onto the busy street. *It can't be.*

James turned back to face the countess, who had stood to approach him. "It must be false," he said. "Some jealous woman's plot to turn me against her."

The countess spread her hands. "I hope, for both of your sakes, that it is so." She sighed. "But you know, James, that she really

is a wild girl. She always does what society says she must not do.”

“But to go that far—” James clenched his hands into fists and turned to face the window again. He barely felt the touch of the countess’ hand on his shoulder, his mind was spinning so much. “I do not believe she is capable of it,” he forced out.

“Then why has she not contradicted it? Why has she not told you? You have seen how much it is troubling her.”

He couldn't deny the truth in her words.

"There must be some other explanation."

Isabelle entered the room with her hands clasped in front of her. "I suppose Victoria has told you."

"Yes." He shook his head, still in a state of disbelief. "What do you make of it? Has Elizabeth said anything to you?" He looked past her, suddenly realizing that Elizabeth hadn't followed. "Where is she?"

“She said she needed rest.” In a rare moment, Isabelle’s gaze was very serious.

“Elizabeth is very upset. She tells me that the rumors are not true.”

“Why hasn’t she said anything about them to me?”

“I do not know,” Isabelle sighed.

“Perhaps she is embarrassed.”

“And if it does prove just to be an idle

rumor, then who would dare to damage Elizabeth's reputation in this way?"

No one had an answer for him. James gazed out at the people walking along the streets and the carriages passing by. He wanted to believe in Elizabeth, but weren't most rumors based on truth? Isabelle and the countess seemed to believe her capable of such a scandalous act, but that wasn't the Elizabeth that James had come to know.

James let out a great sigh and massaged

his forehead. He wished that someone could
tell him what to do.

Chapter 23

Elizabeth contemplated feigning illness so that she wouldn't have to get out of bed. It wouldn't be far from the truth, anyway. She had a terrible headache, and just the thought of eating breakfast made her feel sick. All night she had dreamed of her marriage with James being ruined because of this ridiculous rumor.

She knew that she had to speak to him about it today. Although she wasn't looking forward to discussing such a subject with

James, she knew that he would understand and comfort her. He would be able to help her get to the bottom of this.

First, however, Elizabeth had promised to call on Felicia. She knew that her friend would be worried after her swift exit the day before, so she finally arose and dressed.

But, as she went downstairs, the unexpected was waiting. Elizabeth paused at the sight of James. She hadn't been prepared to speak to him now.

“Elizabeth,” he said urgently, as Mr. Campbell closed the front door behind him, “May I speak with you?”

Elizabeth searched desperately for Lady Kinsley, but she realized that her godmother might not even be awake yet. As she met James’ gaze, her heart began to pound. There was something different in his eyes, a distance that terrified her. “Yes, of course.” She led him to the sitting room. James shut the door behind him.

Elizabeth stood in the middle of the room. James stood across from her, his hands behind his back and his head lowered. He swallowed and cleared his throat. As his foot tapped anxiously on the carpet, he inhaled a deep breath.

“How are you this morning?” The words were spoken hurriedly to the carpet, with no real feeling behind them.

Anxiety bunched in Elizabeth’s stomach.

Why couldn't he just tell her what was wrong?

"I am..., I am feeling rather ill."

James nodded, his lips pressed into a hard line. "I had hoped to find you in better spirits today. I'm sorry your condition has not improved."

Elizabeth couldn't think of what else to say. She waited.

"Elizabeth," James began, his voice trembling slightly. "When I heard of the rumor

being spread about you, I decided that I would wait for you to come to me and tell me the truth of the matter. You were much too troubled yesterday for me to ask you about it. However, this morning my mother told me that she had heard of these accusations too. This affair could bring scandal into our family, and she entreated me to set the record straight. So now I must ask you.” His eyes were so full of pain and fear as they met hers. “Is it true?”

Elizabeth couldn't believe what she was

hearing. By the look in his eyes, she knew he had already decided. Something deep inside of her began to ache, as if she had been physically wounded. She gasped, searching for air. Her legs trembled, and she fell back onto a sofa. James stepped forward, but Elizabeth put up a hand to stop him.

“How could you?” were the only words she could utter. The same words she had said to her father when he had sent her away. How was it that the people she trusted the most always let her down in the end?

James' eyes widened. He stood very still.

“James, I...,I thought...” She had thought he would understand.

Elizabeth swallowed, trying to strengthen her voice. “I trusted you.” Tears threatened to fall, but Elizabeth sniffed and held them back. She rose to her feet as feelings of hurt and betrayal made way for anger.

“I *trusted* you,” she repeated, speaking

louder. “I can see in your eyes that you have already believed the rumor to be true. How could you think such a thing of me?”

James’ expression fell.

Elizabeth tried to organize her thoughts well enough to articulate them. “I thought that we were friends. I did not talk to you about the rumor because I thought that surely you knew me better than to believe it. I came to you for comfort. I thought you cared. I thought—” Elizabeth broke off, as a sob

strangled her words.

James started forward but stopped, his arms halfway outstretched. “I do care about you, Elizabeth, more than I have cared for anyone since my wife. Believe me, I never wanted to injure you.”

The countess had been *right*, Elizabeth realized. James could never love her. His attraction to her had only been superficial, only because he saw something that reminded him of his late wife. He had never truly seen

or cared for *her*, the real Elizabeth.

“That is all I am to you, isn’t it? I am nothing but a replacement for Braith.” Finally, her tears could no longer be bottled up. She let them run down her face, unashamed as she pressed on. “I thought that you were the only person who saw and accepted me for who I truly was. But now I see the truth in what I have feared all along. I am being compared to a ghost.”

James shook his head. “No, Elizabeth.

You could not be further from the truth.”

“Then tell me why she occupies your every thought. If you cannot let go of the past, James, you will never be able to live in the present.”

James was silent. His mouth opened, but no words came forth.

“It is as I feared. You cannot let go.”

Elizabeth huffed, wiping her hands across her eyes. “I have been so wrong, and so blind. You

seemed different, but now I realize you are just like everyone else. Just like my father.”

She shook her head. “I cannot marry someone who sees me only as a replacement. I cannot be with someone who does not trust me.” She paused, knowing that her following words would never be able to be unsaid. “I am setting you free to find your replacement for Braith, James. I’m sorry, but I cannot marry you.”

James’ eyes filled with tears. He took a couple of steps closer to her. “You cannot

mean it.”

“I do. I mean it sincerely. I cannot and will not marry you. You have betrayed me in the worst way imaginable. Marrying Lord Huxley would be preferable to marrying you.” Elizabeth could see that the statement deeply wounded him and tried not to care but seeing him so broken only made the tears fall harder.

“Elizabeth, I am sorry.” He approached her quickly, reaching for her hands. “I will do anything to show you that I did not mean it. I

have been so foolish.”

Elizabeth shook her head, backing away from him. “It is too late.” Unable to stand the pain anymore, Elizabeth turned and left, running straight upstairs into her room. She paced around, crying, balling her hands into fists. Anger burned within her, replacing any positive thoughts she might have had about James. Every touch that had sent her heart fluttering was now shown to be a cheap trick. Every soft word spoken became poison in her memory.

But a sliver of doubt remained, buried deep in her heart underneath the feelings of betrayal. Maybe she shouldn't have been so rash. Maybe James *was* truly sorry.

Yet these thoughts couldn't stand up to the tidal wave of powerful resentment that arose within Elizabeth. She spent all day in her room angry and hurt. Lady Kinsley knocked on her door eventually, asking what was wrong, but Elizabeth told her to go away. She didn't want to see anybody. In fact, she

wished that she could just go home and forget
that she had ever come to London at all.

Chapter 24

James spent the rest of the day deep in thought, unable to concentrate on anyone or anything. He paced endlessly and remained so silent that even Oscar had asked what was wrong. He hadn't even been able to relate his conversation with Elizabeth to his mother.

He was ashamed. As soon as the first accusing words had come from Elizabeth's mouth, James had realized that he had been wrong. He had allowed the poisonous words of others to distract him from who he knew

Elizabeth was. Who knew her better than he? Not even her own father understood her. He had earned her trust and then thrown it away at the first trial.

It was only now that he realized the truth, too late. He loved her. He loved her deeply. And not because she was like Braith, but because she was *Elizabeth*, the fiery, passionate woman who never feared to speak her mind.

She had told him it was too late. How

could he ever earn back her trust? How could he ever find the words to apologize for his grave error?

Night fell, and James was still uneasy. Sleep was far away. Instead, James sat down and wrote a long, heartfelt letter, his penmanship as sloppy as the emotions that poured out of him. He apologized repeatedly, begging for Elizabeth's forgiveness. He told her how much he truly loved her and how he would prove it to her every day of their lives if only she would accept him again.

By the time he was finished, he felt as if he hadn't slept in days. He didn't plan on actually giving the letter to Elizabeth but laying out all his thoughts and feelings on paper clarified them and made him feel more at peace. Soon after, he was able to lie in bed and drift off, though his sleep was uneasy.

James awoke early the next morning feeling as though he hadn't had a moment of rest. He tried to read a book to pass the time until the household awoke, but found that he

couldn't comprehend the words. His thoughts were too full of other things.

Hours were passed in silence and reflection, until James joined his mother in the dining room for breakfast, feeling guilty for the way that he had ignored her the previous day.

“Good morning, Mother.” He greeted her with as much cheerfulness as he could muster and tried to smile, but he could tell she wasn't fooled. She looked at him with compassion.

“How did you sleep, James?”

As he sat across from her, he thought of making light of his turmoil, but he knew she would see through it easily. “Not very well, I’m afraid.” He looked into her eyes. “I am truly sorry for how distant I was yesterday.”

“Will you tell me what happened? I am worried about you.”

James glanced at the food available on

the table but decided he wasn't hungry. He clenched and unclenched his fists in his lap.

"It pains me to speak of it."

"Then do not bear it all on your own."

Erin's expression shone with understanding.

"Let me help you, James."

James let out a long sigh. "As you know, I went to speak to Elizabeth yesterday." He shook his head. "I should have defended her character as soon as I heard that terrible rumor, but instead, I doubted her when I had

no reason to. Elizabeth was hurt that I could ever think her capable of such a thing.”

“It is not your fault that people decided to talk about her in such a way.”

“But it *is* my fault that I listened to others instead of doing the right thing. I should have gone to comfort Elizabeth rather than accuse her.” He let his head fall into his hand. “I have made a terrible mistake.”

“If she truly cares for you, she will

forgive you.”

“I do not think so. You did not hear the anger in her voice when she spoke to me. She is stubborn, Mother.” He let out a short laugh. “I do not criticize her. It is a trait of hers that I admire. She has every right to deny me her forgiveness.”

Erin reached across the table and put her hand over James’. “Everyone deserves forgiveness because we all make mistakes. You are a good man, James.” She squeezed his

hand. “Elizabeth *must* see that. But you will never know unless you confess your error in judgment and ask her forgiveness.”

James just shook his head.

“Go to Isabelle’s house,” Erin continued.

“At least ask to see her and let her know that you are come to apologize. If nothing else, she will at least know that you are sorry.”

He found it ironic that, as much as he did want to apologize to Elizabeth, he also

dreaded seeing her again. What if she was unchanged in her position towards him?

Yet his mother was right. It would not be an easy task, but it was one he had to carry out.

James nodded and looked up, offering his mother a weak smile. "You are right. Thank you, Mother. I will leave immediately." He stood, resolute in his purpose. "Will you please tell Oscar that I will be back soon? I am sorry to miss him this morning, but I do not want to

wait.”

“I will tell him.” Erin stood and kissed her son’s cheek. “I hope that it goes well.”

“Thank you.” On an impulse, he visited the garden briefly to gather his thoughts and pick a few yellow flowers before setting off to Isabelle’s house. It was a little early for calling, but he knew he had to get this weight off his chest. He had to apologize and humble himself before Elizabeth.

Mr. Campbell looked surprised to see James but allowed him in. Isabelle rushed into the foyer, looking as if she had gotten just as much sleep as James had.

“James,” she sighed. “Elizabeth will not tell me what has happened, but I gather that she is fiercely angry.”

The words pierced his heart. *Fiercely angry*. “I fear it is my fault, Isabelle. The rumor about Elizabeth is, of course, a terrible lie, no doubt conjured up by some foolish

woman who is jealous of her.” He sighed. “But it seems I am the greater fool. I admit that I allowed myself to believe that the whispers were true, despite how well I know Elizabeth’s character. I truly betrayed her trust, and she has every right to be furious with me.”

There was a knock at the front door, and Mr. Campbell admitted the Countess of Chester. “James, Isabelle,” she breathed, looking surprised to see them just inside the doorway.

“I asked Victoria to come and help me decide what to do with Elizabeth,” Isabelle explained. She shook her head. “I could barely get a word out of her yesterday. She did not eat a morsel.”

It hurt James even further to know he had wounded her so deeply. “Please, I must make amends. Let me speak to her.”

The countess moved in front of the staircase. “I do not think that would be wise, James. If Elizabeth is as angry as Isabelle told

me, she needs time to gather her thoughts before she sees you again.”

“You do not understand.” He pressed his lips together, not wanting to admit it. “She has called off our engagement.”

Isabelle and the countess exchanged astonished looks.

“James...” Isabelle trailed off, unsure of what to say.

“I must apologize. Please,” he implored Isabelle. Her eyes softened.

The countess, however, remained in place. “It is not a good idea, James. I say this for your sake. Give her a little time.”

James considered how angry she had been yesterday, and rightfully so. Maybe the countess was correct. The last thing he wanted was to make things worse.

“Perhaps it would be for the best,

James,” Isabelle added softly. “I can write to you as soon as I think Elizabeth has calmed down. For now, Victoria and I will stay with her.”

James sighed. He wanted to fix things now, to make it right, but he saw the wisdom in Victoria and Isabelle’s words. “Though it pains me to say it, I believe you might be right. Please keep me abreast of how she is and let me know the moment you think it would be good for me to come. I want to make amends.”

“You must not be so hard on yourself, James,” the countess said with apparent pity, placing a gentle hand on his arm.

James shook his head. “You are wrong on that account. If I cannot make amends with Elizabeth, I will never forgive myself.” He nodded to the two ladies. “Thank you. I will go now. Please write to me about Elizabeth soon.” He suddenly remembered the flowers he’d held clutched in his hand this whole time and held them out to Isabelle. “Please give

these to her, if she will have them.”

Isabelle took them from his grasp. “I will. I’m very sorry, James. Elizabeth will come around. I am sure of it.”

The countess said nothing, but by her countenance, she did not look so certain.

James left, feeling just as dejected as he had the night before. He went home and tried to be in good spirits for Oscar and his mother, but found himself still troubled. He truly

wondered if Elizabeth would ever find it in her heart to forgive him.

Chapter 25

Elizabeth was caught in a never-ending cycle of anger, guilt, betrayal, and remorse. Even after spending all day and night secluded in her room, she hadn't been able to organize her thoughts. She was still angry, yes, but she also wondered if she had been too harsh on James.

Now, as the morning sunlight filtered through the curtains, Elizabeth wondered what to do next. With her feelings still so muddled, she thought it couldn't hurt if she

took some more time to reflect.

For the first time since she had talked with James the day before, Elizabeth ventured from her room. Her stomach growled, as she hadn't eaten anything for over an entire day. It was just after noon when she made her way down the stairs and found Lady Kinsley and, to her annoyance, the countess in the sitting room.

“Elizabeth,” Lady Kinsley said, standing up immediately. She rushed over to her and

took her hands. “How are you?”

That was a question Elizabeth hadn't even been able to answer for herself yet. “I..., I do not know.” She needed someone to confide in. While she had some respect for her godmother, she wasn't someone she trusted enough to share her feelings with.

“I'm so sorry about what has happened. Victoria and I have just been discussing who could have started that horrid rumor about you.”

Who indeed? Elizabeth thought, glancing at the countess, who was obviously trying her best to look like innocence incarnate. One of the things she had thought of frequently during her isolation was who could have started the rumor. In all her musings, she kept coming back to the countess. She had a strong enough motive and a ruthless nature. When combined, Elizabeth thought she would probably do anything to get what she wanted, no matter the cost to others.

“And have your discussions produced any result?” Elizabeth asked, staring at the countess.

The countess finally caught her eye behind Lady Kinsley. Something akin to a smirk twitched at her lips.

“Not so far,” sighed Mrs. Kinsley. “I do not know anyone who would wish to injure your reputation and James’ feelings in such a way.”

“I have had some ideas,” Elizabeth said,
“but I cannot prove anything yet.”

Lady Kinsley looked at Elizabeth in pity.
“You look so pale. I will make sure something
is prepared for you to eat.” She walked out of
the room to speak with one of the servants.

“You will never get James back now,” the
countess said in a whisper, though there was
venom in her tone.

“It is no concern of yours,” countered

Elizabeth. "I will forgive him in time, but you, I will never be able to forgive."

The countess huffed a short laugh. "Oh, what a pity. I have tried so hard to be in your good graces."

Elizabeth felt her anger rising again, but then Lady Kinsley returned. The countess flashed a triumphant smile.

"Food is being prepared for you and should be ready in the dining room shortly,

Elizabeth.” Lady Kinsley put a hand on her back and guided her in that direction. “Are you ready to talk about what happened?”

Once again, Elizabeth contemplated that she didn’t want to confide in her godmother, but she had kept her emotions bottled up inside for too long. “James believed the lies about me.” Just saying it out loud made tears sting her eyes. “I trusted him, and I thought I knew him, but yesterday he proved differently.”

“Elizabeth,” Lady Kinsley soothed when they walked into the dining room with the countess behind them. “He made an error of judgment.”

“About my character,” Elizabeth said, pulling away from Lady Kinsley’s touch. She noticed a vase of flowers that hadn’t been in the dining room before. Yellow flowers. *James*. The thought made it hurt even more.

Lady Kinsley must have seen where her eyes were because she said, “James was here

this morning. He asked to see you and wanted to apologize, but we thought it best to let you have some time alone first.”

Elizabeth nodded, grateful that she hadn't been forced to make the choice herself. “Thank you.”

Food was brought only for Elizabeth, as Lady Kinsley claimed she and the countess had already eaten. Yet they stayed with her as though afraid to leave her alone. Elizabeth found she was starving and began eating in

relative silence. Lady Kinsley and the countess conversed quietly across from her.

“Elizabeth,” Lady Kinsley said after a while, “did you really break off your engagement with James?”

Elizabeth paused. “Yes,” she said softly. And she was resolute in her decision. If James hadn’t been there for her in a matter like this, how could she expect him to support her as a husband?

“You know that I must write to your father. I understand that this affair was not your fault, but he still must know.”

Elizabeth sank into her chair. She had already resigned herself to this, but she still feared what her father would say. “Yes, I know. Please tell him that I am sorry, but I did what I thought was right.”

“Of course, I will.”

The countess looked as though she was

struggling to contain her delight at the conversation. Elizabeth wished that she could know what the woman was really about. How could she prove that the countess had started the rumor? As far as Elizabeth could see, it didn't seem possible.

“Victoria, would you mind staying with Elizabeth while I write the letter?”

Her gaze showed that she did mind, but out loud she said, “Not at all.”

Lady Kinsley left, leaving the countess alone with Elizabeth.

“Do not think that you will get away with this,” Elizabeth said, keeping her eyes trained on her food.

“Whatever do you mean?” asked the countess innocently.

“I will discover what you are trying to do. I will reveal your true face to James and my godmother. You do not deserve to have

friends like them.”

She frowned. “Lady Elizabeth, I am a countess, and you are about to be married to a terrible brute of a man out in the country. There is nothing you can do.”

Elizabeth tightened her grip on her fork. “It is not certain that I will marry Lord Huxley. My father will understand once the situation is explained to him.” At least, she hoped so. Elizabeth was glad that she sounded more confident than she felt.

The countess laughed. “You are sadly mistaken, you poor girl. Haven’t you wondered why everyone is so against you? Your father, your godmother, even James? You are not trustworthy. Your very nature, the rebelliousness you strive to hold onto, pushes everyone away. How could anyone remain attached to someone like you?”

Elizabeth wouldn’t look at her, refusing to give her the satisfaction of seeing how her words rattled her. Her own thoughts had been

running along the same lines, and those doubts were still plaguing her. She pushed the troubling thoughts aside and continued eating, finding strength in confronting the countess.

“And what about you, countess?”

Elizabeth looked up to meet the haughty woman’s gaze. “Are *you* trustworthy?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“I mean that both of your husbands died in the same manner. I became suddenly ill

before the ball I was to attend with James.

These rumors began just before I was to wed James. Each of these instances have something in common. You have something to gain in every circumstance.”

Elizabeth let her words hang in the air for a moment, meeting the countess’ gaze. If she wasn’t mistaken, she thought she saw concern flash across the countess’ face for a fraction of a second.

“You read too many books and forget

that there is such a thing as coincidence. It is all very unfortunate, yes, but as for you, you have brought this all upon yourself.”

Elizabeth steeled her jaw. She knew she couldn't let her words get to her. Instead, she spoke clearly and forcefully. “I will find out who you truly are, Countess. You may doubt me, but I am telling you that you have wounded an innocent soul for the last time.”

The countess sighed and shook her head. “Your poor spirits have addled your brain. You

really must eat some more.”

Elizabeth did so and ignored the countess entirely. She vowed to herself that she would find out the truth about the woman. She owed it to James, herself, and anyone else that woman had ever injured.

As she had realized days before, she knew very well that the countess could be dangerous.

Chapter 26

James spent four restless days trying and failing to occupy his mind. He wondered if Isabelle hadn't written because Elizabeth was still angry. Perhaps he was right, and she would never forgive him? After so long with no word, he feared the worst. He was barely able to stop himself, but with the help of his mother, he refrained from going to Isabelle's house and asking after Elizabeth himself.

"You must give her time to think," his mother had said, once he had come home still

looking dejected. *“You have made it known to her that you regret your actions. Now you must wait patiently.”*

“Father, why are you so sad?”

James looked up. He hadn't even heard his son come into the library, but there he was, standing in the middle of the room and staring up at him.

James huffed a light chuckle, closing the book he had been attempting to read without

success. “Where is your governess?”

Oscar beamed. “I’m hiding from her.”

James shook his head. “That is not kind,
Oscar. You must go apologize to her at once.”

“But you didn’t answer my question.”

James paused for a moment. “What
makes you think I am sad?”

“You have such a big frown on your face,

and you barely even talk to Grandmother.

That's when I know something is wrong."

James couldn't help but smile. He invited Oscar to sit next to him on the sofa and slumped forward, running a hand over his face. "You are too perceptive, Oscar. You have found me out."

"How can you be so sad when you were so happy before?"

James pressed his lips together, trying to

phrase his words so that Oscar would understand. “Sometimes..., one makes mistakes. And some mistakes can cost you your happiness.”

Oscar frowned, his eyebrows furrowing comically over his eyes. “So, you will be sad forever?”

“No. At least I hope not.” He remembered how he had thought that he’d never be happy again after Braith had passed. While her loss still hurt, the pain had ebbed over time. When

he met Elizabeth, she had brought vibrancy and joy back into his life. “Sadness always goes away, in time. It just might take a little while.” He offered his son a small smile. “I will try very hard to be happy, just for you.”

“I can make you happy, Father. See?” He stuck out his tongue, rolled his eyes, and made a grotesque face.

James laughed. “It seems I am cured. You have made me happy again.” He chuckled, as he ruffled Oscar’s hair.

The governess appeared in the doorway.

“Oscar!” Her eyes met James’ for only a fraction of a second. “Forgive me, my lord.”

James waved off the apology. “You are not the one who needs to ask for forgiveness.” He put a hand on Oscar’s back and gently nudged him toward his governess.

Oscar stared down at the carpet with his hands clasped in front of him. “I’m sorry, Miss Ludwig. I should not have run away from

you.”

Miss Ludwig smiled. “You are forgiven, sir.” She looked to James with a question in her eyes. “Shall I take him with me, my lord?”

James shook his head. “I will keep Oscar here for the time being. I think,” he said, standing up, “that it is time for me to teach him my favorite game.”

“Chess!” Oscar exclaimed, practically exploding with excitement. He jumped up and

down. “You are finally going to teach me,
Father?”

“Yes.” James crossed to the other side of
the room to get the chessboard.

Miss Ludwig nodded. “Very well, my
lord.” She departed, leaving James with his
son.

Oscar followed behind his father, barely
containing his glee. “I am finally going to
learn chess! I can be a gentleman now!”

James chuckled as he brought the chessboard back to the table and began to set it up. Oscar sat across from him, watching solemnly as though taking in every single detail. James smiled. He had planned to wait to teach Oscar chess until he was a little older, but now that James longed to occupy his mind with something other than Elizabeth, he felt it was the perfect time. Besides, his son was clever and perceptive, and would surely quickly pick up the rudiments of the game.

“May I have the black pieces, Father?”

Oscar asked.

“You may, but you should know that the player who chooses white goes first.”

Oscar looked back at the board thoughtfully. “Then I shall be white,” he decided.

“Very well,” James said. “Now, each one of these pieces,” he began, as he started putting them in their proper places, “can move

in its own special way. I will explain as we go through the game.”

Oscar nodded, already entirely focused on the board in front of him. James finished setting up and gestured to the board. “Take note where each piece is. The board is set up the same way each time. Now, you may move first, and I will tell you a secret. Your first move is essential to the rest of the game. If you make a poor first move, it is possible that the rest of the game will go badly for you.”

James paused for a moment. He remembered teaching Elizabeth how to play chess and telling her how important the first move was. She had made a terrible move anyway, though not on purpose. He remembered the way she had smiled and laughed, admitting her ignorance of the complexities of the game.

“Father?”

James shook himself from his memories. He chided himself for thinking of her when he

was trying to spend time with his son. He simply couldn't help it. Elizabeth was written onto his heart.

“Yes, the first move. A very good first move is to shift this pawn forward two spaces,” he said, pointing. Normally those pieces can only move one space, but the first move is an exception.”

Oscar moved the piece indicated. James placed a finger on his piece to move, wondering whether he should go easy on

Oscar. Once again, he thought of Elizabeth. He had been faced with the same choice when he had played with her—to let her off easy or to show his skill.

“I think you are holding back,” she had said, with a smile. *“You have allowed me to take far too many of your pieces.”*

James had shrugged. *“Perhaps you possess a natural skill for the game.”*

Elizabeth had laughed heartily. *“We both*

know that is not true.”

He had played to win then. Elizabeth lost with good grace, laughing and promising that she would try to give him more of a challenge next time.

James wondered if he would ever play chess with her again.

“You look sad again,” Oscar said. “Did I do something wrong?”

James shook his head. His son's concerned expression came into focus. "No, no. The fault is mine. I fear I am distracted."

"You have told me it's not good to be distracted during chess."

"Indeed," James sighed, raking his fingers through his hair. "I fear this is not the escape I had hoped for."

Oscar's head cocked to the side, and he raised one eyebrow. It was a look that he had

adopted from Braith. “What are you escaping from?”

James looked into his son’s eyes. He didn’t want to let him down. He wanted to teach him chess and cheer at his success, but he feared that he didn’t have the capacity for that kind of joy at that moment.

James took his hands off the board and folded them under his chin. “You know that ever since your mother died, I have been alone.”

“You have me! And Grandmother!” Oscar protested.

“Yes, of course I do, but it’s a little different. I’ve been looking for someone like your mother, Oscar. Not someone to replace her, but someone else who can be by my side.”

“Like a princess in the fairy stories?” His eyes grew wide. “Have you found her?”

A smile twitched at his lips. Elizabeth

was a princess, indeed. “I thought I had.” He tapped a finger against his chin, trying to think of the best way to describe it. “I have told you before that chess is a thinking game, yes?”

Oscar nodded. “I remember. You said there is no reason to be faster than your opponent.”

“Precisely. A move made too quickly can cost you the whole game. I fear that is what I did with my princess. I made a rash judgment,

and it very well may have caused me to lose her forever.”

Oscar picked up one of the knights and brought it up to his eyes. “You lost her like we lost Mother?”

“No, I lost her in a different way.”

Oscar frowned at him, and James knew he didn’t understand. “What I mean to tell you, Oscar, is that this is the reason why I have been distracted. I promise you that I will

try to recover my spirits soon, but it is not easy when you have lost someone.”

Oscar turned the knight around in his hand. Suddenly, he jumped out of his seat. “Chess will only make you more solemn, Father. Perhaps the flowers in the garden will cheer you up! They make me smile.”

James stood and stretched his legs. “Do you know, Oscar, I think that might be the very thing I need.” He flashed a smile at his son and patted his head.

The butler entered the room and held something out to James. “A letter for you, my lord.”

James crossed the room in a few long strides and took it quickly from the butler’s hand, thanking him briefly before breaking the seal and unfolding it. He recognized Isabelle’s handwriting immediately.

“Oscar,” he said, looking over the letter, “please go back to Miss Ludwig. We will take a

walk around the garden later, I promise.”

“Is it from your princess?”

“I certainly hope that it is good news about her.” He crouched down and squeezed his son’s shoulder. “I will see you in a little while and tell you the news.”

Oscar smiled, looking glad to be included. He rushed off to find his governess, leaving James alone to read the letter.

James,

*Elizabeth seems to be recovering her spirits,
but I fear for her after some news I have received
today. You must come as soon as possible, but I
must ask you not to hope. There has been a
dreadful turn of events.*

Sincerely,

Isabelle Kinsley

James had scarcely finished reading it

when he started moving. He ordered his carriage immediately, told his mother he was going out, and was soon on his way to the other side of London. He found himself impatiently tapping his foot, as the carriage didn't seem to go fast enough. What news could be worse than Elizabeth not speaking to him?

He raced out of the carriage once it arrived at Isabelle's house. He was admitted inside and led to the sitting room, where Isabelle and the countess seemed to be deep in

earnest conversation. They stood as he was announced. Isabelle looked extremely distressed as she came towards him, while the countess looked almost happy.

“James,” Isabelle sighed. “Elizabeth has secluded herself in her room once again. I have just received a letter from her father this morning.”

James waited with bated breath.

“He is giving Elizabeth no alternative.

She must marry Lord Huxley immediately.”

The world came crashing down around James. His heart felt as if it was split in two. This was all his fault. “It cannot be,” he choked out. “Surely her father understands it was not her fault—”

“She was the one who called off the engagement, James. Her father told her she had to marry, and she disobeyed him when she made that decision. She could have married you despite what happened.”

James tried to grasp at something,
anything that could bring her back to him.
“Please, Isabelle, let me speak to her. There
must be something I can do.”

The countess cut in. “She is very
distraught, James. She would not want to see
you in her current state.”

“Besides,” Isabelle continued, “I fear
Edward has run out of patience with
Elizabeth. He is adamant that she must marry

now.” She hesitated. “I do not wish to admit it, but Elizabeth leaves in a few days for Deuney Keep. There is nothing else to be done.”

James felt as if he were being crushed. “You are telling me I will not even be able to see her again?”

“It is for the best, isn’t it?” said the countess. “It would be painful for both of you, knowing that you cannot change what is going to happen.”

James simply stood there for a moment, unsure of what to do. He couldn't accept that Elizabeth was lost to him forever. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he held them back.

“Then I suppose I must leave you immediately. Tell Elizabeth.” His mouth went dry. There were so many things he wished he would have said to her. *Too late.* “Tell her that I wish her every happiness.”

Isabelle nodded sadly. “I will, James. I

am...,” She sighed as if she couldn’t find the words. “I am so sorry.”

“It is so unfortunate,” agreed the countess. “But I daresay you will recover, James. Do not give up hope.”

Hope for what? James wondered. *Hope that I might marry you instead.* He couldn’t even entertain the distasteful thought.

“I must go now.” He bowed quickly, not able to bear being in the place where he had

shared so many happy memories with Elizabeth. “May you have a pleasant day, ladies.” With that, he left hurriedly. Once inside the carriage, James bent over in grief. He didn’t understand how this had all turned sour so quickly. Just like that, Elizabeth had been taken away from him forever.

He shouldn’t have taken her for granted.

Chapter 27

Elizabeth paced across her room endlessly. Unlike her grief from a few days before, when she felt she had been unable to move, she now felt frantic as if she couldn't stop being active. Her mind spun. She tried to work out what to do, but this wasn't a decision she could just make on the spot like how she had accepted the James's proposal and then broken off their engagement. Even after hours of thinking, she still hadn't been able to make up her mind.

Once again, Elizabeth picked up the letter she had received from her father, hoping to find a loophole that would allow her to escape from the situation she landed herself in.

My Dear Child,

I am grieved to hear that your engagement to the Duke of Darrington has been dissolved.

Lady Kinsley told me the particulars, and while I cannot say that I agree with your decision, I am sorry for the hurt that this idle gossip has caused

you. I did not think the Duke was capable of doing such a thing; he seemed very amiable when I met him. If you are as determined as your godmother tells me you are not to enter into an engagement with him again, then I must present you with my final decision. You will marry Lord Huxley. I am afraid that there is no alternative, Elizabeth. Though I had hoped to be able to rescue my estate, matters have only deteriorated since you have left. If nothing is done very soon, we will both fall to ruin. Marrying Huxley is the only way to fix matters in time. I could not bear to leave you unprovided for. I have spoken to him

again, and he is still willing to have you.

Therefore, consider yourself engaged to him. I have written to Lady Kinsley in a separate letter, and she knows you are to return home in a few days to be married. The wedding will be in a fortnight, and I will arrange a meeting with Lord Huxley as soon as you arrive home.

I am very sorry, my dear Elizabeth. I know that Lord Huxley is not your ideal husband, but at least I will know that you are safe and provided for.

Sincerely,

Edward Gladstone, Earl of Waymouth

Tears filled Elizabeth's eyes every time she reread the letter. She knew that her father really was sorry for her and that Huxley was not his ideal choice either, but she wished he could have done something else to delay. Did he realize just how miserable she would be with Lord Huxley?

The letter crinkled as Elizabeth grasped it tightly, the pages already softened from the

many times she had held it tightly in the past few hours. So many options presented themselves in her head that she hardly knew which course of action to ponder.

She kept coming back to one idea. *Write to James.* Though her pride hadn't softened enough to allow her to think of it, her father had been very clear. There was no time. Either face ruin or marry Lord Huxley.

She also considered an alternative way out, though she still shied away from the

thought. She could run away.

Elizabeth's heart quickened as she thought of it again. She had read and heard of young ladies running away from unsavory marriages, but she had never considered that she would be doing likewise. Where would she go? What would she do? Would her father come looking for her?

In her heart of hearts, Elizabeth knew she could never do such a thing. As opposed as she was to her father's decisions, she still loved

him. She couldn't bear the thought of him facing financial ruin and being worried about her safety.

Besides, Elizabeth considered that she had created this mess. If she hadn't been so opposed to marrying and had listened to her father, she could have saved him from ruin a long time ago. She'd had a chance with Huxley, then with James, and she had refused both.

She could have fixed her relationship

with James. She could have forgiven him and told him how she really felt about him.

Instead, she had allowed her stubbornness to get the best of her. And now, it was simply too late.

Elizabeth fell into a chair and dropped her head into her hands. She felt the weight of guilt and responsibility fall on her shoulders. She had to pay for her actions. She had to set right the wrong she had done to her father.

Elizabeth rose to her feet and held back

her tears as she was now resolute in her purpose. Though she was distraught at the very thought of it, she would marry Lord Huxley.

* * *

“Elizabeth?” A knock sounded softly on her door. “Elizabeth, you have a letter.”

Elizabeth reluctantly opened the door to Lady Kinsley, who handed over a folded paper sealed with wax. Elizabeth took it, noting that she hadn’t seen a smile on her godmother’s

face in several days.

“It is from your friend Lady Darwin,” she said with an attempt at a smile.

“Thank you,” Elizabeth said softly, and moved to close the door.

“Elizabeth, wait.” Mrs. Kinsley stepped into the doorway. “I have not seen you eat anything in the past two days. Please come down and sit with me. I’ve had Mrs. Lockhart prepare your favorite soup.”

Having accepted her grim fate, all she could feel was a gnawing emptiness in her gut. “Thank you for your kindness, Lady Kinsley, but I am not hungry.”

Lady Kinsley pressed her lips together, her brow furrowed, but she said nothing. After a moment, she nodded sadly and left.

Elizabeth closed the door and turned to Felicia’s letter. She opened it carefully, her heart already longing for the comfort of her

dearest friend.

Dear Elizabeth,

Lady Kinsley has no doubt told you that I have tried to call on you three times. She tells me that you have confined yourself to your room and refuse to emerge for anything or anyone. She has also told me all that has happened. It is not her fault. I pressed her for the knowledge.

Elizabeth, I feel so much sorrow for you right now. I do not know how this can be made

right, but I wish I could somehow make it so. I am told you are leaving tomorrow. Please see me before you go. I know that the rumors about you are utterly false, and Hannah, Clarice, and I have been trying to make it known across London. I do not entirely approve of some of their methods, but I have been doing my best to make your true character known.

Elizabeth smiled despite herself, though she wondered what Felicia meant about Hannah and Clarice's methods. Tears fell from her eyes at the thought of her friends' loyalty,

and she quickly wiped them away so she could finish reading.

Please contact me, my dear friend. And I beg of you to eat. I know how you often starve yourself when you are upset. Do not fall into despair. There is always hope.

Your friend,

Felicia Darwin

Elizabeth sighed as she finished the letter. Felicia was too good a friend for her,

never showing anything but loyalty even in the face of everything Elizabeth had done wrong.

Elizabeth immediately went to her desk to reply.

My dear Felicia,

Your letter has been the only comfort I have received these past few days. Lady Kinsley did tell me you came to call, but what she did not tell you is that I do not want your reputation to be marred

by your proximity to me. Though I appreciate your efforts, as well as Hannah and Clarice's (whatever they may be), in trying to dispel the gossip, I fear that it is too deeply rooted to be done away with so quickly. Lady Kinsley has told me that you and the Earl of Presport have become the talk of London, and I do not want anything to stand in the way of your happiness. Please do not worry about me. This whole situation is my fault, and I must rectify it in the only way I can. I will write to you as soon as I am able when I arrive in Deuney Keep. I will say it once more—please put my troubles from your mind. I want every

happiness for you and your earl.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Gladstone

Elizabeth summoned Marie and asked for the letter to be posted as soon as possible.

Even her maid seemed to show concern for her as she asked humbly, “Is there anything else I can do for you, Lady Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth considered her destiny. She thought of her father’s letter and of Felicia’s

longing to see her. She thought of James. Lady Kinsley had told her he'd called and wished her happiness. It was more than likely that she would never see him again.

“No, Marie,” Elizabeth replied, turning away. “There is nothing anyone can do.”

Chapter 28

“Father, I thought you said you were going to be happy now, but you look even sadder than before.” Oscar looked up at him with a frown. James noticed that ever since he had been downcast, the mood had rubbed off on his son.

James didn't know what to say. It had been days now, but he still couldn't come to grips with the fact that Elizabeth was lost to him forever, that he'd never see her again. It was too much for him to bear. Despite his

earlier promise to his son to try to be happy despite the circumstances, James had found himself unable to find joy in anything.

“I am very sorry, Oscar.” James looked down at his breakfast plate and found that he wasn’t hungry. “I will try, I promise you.”

“Can I help?”

James glanced up at his mother, who had been watching the scene all the while. She nodded a little in encouragement.

“Perhaps we can take a walk in the garden before I must go?”

“Is today the day you are to visit the Earl of Presport?” his mother asked.

“Yes,” James sighed. “I confess I feel as if I do not want to visit anyone, but he implored me in his letter, and I felt I couldn’t refuse.”

“It will be good to see your friend again.” Erin smiled. “I remember when the two of you

would play together as children.”

James smiled at the memories. “Daniel could always come up with make-believe games for us to play. We would be lost in them for hours.” He nodded. “I do believe it will be good to see him again.”

After breakfast, James took Oscar out into the garden. He quizzed his son on the names of the flowers and various plants, helping him when he couldn't remember. Oscar pointed out to James which ones were

his favorites, and why. For a little while, James was able to forget about his troubles.

As the sun rose to its peak, James took note of the time. He sent Oscar back to his governess with a promise he would be back for dinner, and he said farewell to his mother before leaving for Daniel's estate.

It was a longer carriage ride, but James didn't mind the solitude. It gave him time to think. He was looking forward to the meeting with his friend, but he also knew that he

hadn't been finding enjoyment in the things he usually loved to do. It could very well be that this visit would only make his melancholy spirits even worse.

When he arrived, Daniel greeted him warmly. "My friend!" he said, with a wide smile. "I am so glad you have accepted my invitation."

"Indeed," James agreed, noting the ornate decorations in the foyer. A beautiful landscape painting caught his eye. "Is this one

of yours?”

Daniel bowed his head humbly. “I painted it during my visit to the Peak District two years ago.”

James had forgotten just how talented his friend was. The colors were deep and rich, making him feel as if he were actually there. “Exquisite.” He turned to face Daniel. “It has been a long time since I have seen your work. Do you have any more on display?”

Daniel led him to his private gallery filled with his work, as well as other art he admired. It had been many years since James had been so immersed in art, and he found himself transfixed by the beauty all around him. Daniel explained some of the artwork and how he had acquired it, but his voice seemed to fade away as James gazed at a painting of a ball. The dancing couples only made him think of the ball where he had danced with Elizabeth and proposed to her.

James felt Daniel's presence at his side. "I

heard about what happened between you and Lady Elizabeth.”

James laughed bitterly and scoffed. “Is nothing private anymore? And is that the only reason why you invited me here, to see if it was true?”

“Of course not,” Daniel replied, his voice gentle. “You know me better than that, James.”

James realized that he was once again

making rash judgments due to frustration and sadness. “My apologies. Of course not. I confess I have not been myself recently.” He swept his hand over his face.

“When I saw you and Lady Elizabeth together, you were happier than I have seen you in many years. You looked so carefree and unburdened. What happened?”

James pressed his lips together. He didn’t want to talk about it, but it would be a relief to confide in someone who would understand.

“No doubt you heard the rumors surrounding Lady Elizabeth’s past?”

Daniel paused, then nodded slowly. “Yes, I confess I did hear them. What a terrible thing gossip is.”

“Yes,” sighed James, “and unfortunately, I was taken in by it. I must confess that I started to believe the rumors as everyone around me seemed to. Elizabeth rightly accused me and broke off our engagement. I was such a fool.”

Daniel looked at him earnestly. “And you have been unable to earn her forgiveness?”

“She is stubborn, Daniel. Her ability to make confident decisions is an admirable quality. Even now I think of it with awe. I had hoped, however, that her anger toward me would fade, and I would be able to apologize. But before that could happen, her father sent her a letter. He is forcing her to marry a brute of an old man, and she is to leave in only a few days.” He met Daniel’s eyes. “So now I am

left without knowing whether or not she is still angry. The last time I called, she was too distressed to see me.”

Daniel hummed in thought. “You fear there is no hope?”

“I know there is none. She will be married in less than a fortnight. What else can I do? Even if she has forgiven me, it would be too painful for us to speak.”

“Did you love her?” Daniel turned his

gaze away, staring at the painting instead.

James paused. He had never said it out loud, only admitted it to himself and in the letter that he still kept tucked away in his desk. “I do. I still love her. She is unlike anyone I have ever met.”

Daniel nodded and offered him a small smile. “Then do not give up all hope. There may yet still be a way.”

James shook his head, knowing that it

was not to be. Isabelle had even said that there was nothing else to be done.

“You doubt me,” said Daniel, “but I simply cannot believe that you, one of the best men I know, can be met with yet another misfortune after the death of your wife. You deserve so much better.”

“It is not about what I deserve,” James sighed. “But perhaps you have such fanciful notions due to your interactions with Lady Darwin.” He offered his friend the ghost of a

smile.

“Ah, James,” he said with a grin, leading him to another part of the gallery. “She is such a beautiful person, and so intelligent and kind. She is rather unlike the other ladies you find in London. Her conversation is interesting and refreshingly different.”

“I am glad for you,” James said sincerely. If he could not find contentment with his own love, at least he could rejoice at the success of others.

“James,” laughed Daniel. “You have always been the solemn, downhearted one. You must try to see things more optimistically. There is always a way, my friend, no matter what. It all depends on what you decide to do. You are simply lying down and accepting fate, rather than chasing after it yourself. Are you really going to let this woman you claim to love slip from your grasp because of some beastly engagement her father has forced upon her? You must take action, James.” He passed his gaze over an intricately crafted sculpture

of a horse. “The future is not set in stone.”

Chapter 29

Elizabeth was sick of the refined ways of London. All around her in the crowded tea-room were fine ladies and gentlemen dressed in their very best, not a hair out of place, no doubt talking of the newest scandal, whatever it was. While Elizabeth's scandal had caused quite a stir, she was sure the gossip had moved on to some other poor soul now.

She hated London, she had decided over the past few days. It was crowded, and everyone hid behind a mask even more so

than people did back home in the country. It was as if everyone expected everyone else to be absolutely perfect, and, if you made a single mistake, your reputation was ruined forever. The wealthy were like packs of wolves that devoured the innocent. Elizabeth had done nothing wrong, and yet she was being penalized just for wanting to marry a duke.

“Are you quite well, Elizabeth?” Lady Kinsley asked.

“I am thinking of how glad I am to be

leaving London,” Elizabeth said. “I do not like it at all.”

Lady Kinsley looked down at the table. Ever since Elizabeth had finally come out of her room only a day ago, she often struggled to know what to say.

Elizabeth looked up, as she sensed someone walking towards their table. The Countess of Chester had arrived, and she was smiling as if she were in a joyous mood.

Most likely it is because she knows I am leaving, thought Elizabeth. It sent a pang of sadness through her heart as she realized that the countess would have James all to herself now. But would James have her? Even after all they had been through, she didn't truly believe that he would.

"Victoria!" Lady Kinsley said with a smile, relieved that there was someone else to have a conversation with. "Thank you so much for joining us. Elizabeth's last day in London would not be complete without you!"

Victoria sat in a vacant chair, and the tea was served. “Such a sad occasion,” she said, but her words were empty, as her eyes betrayed her satisfaction. “I am so sorry to see you go, Elizabeth. I have very much enjoyed our time together over these past months.” There was a nefarious gleam in her eye as she met Elizabeth’s gaze.

“I was just telling Lady Kinsley that I am glad to be leaving. There is some good company in London, to be sure, but on the

whole, the people who live here are cruel gossipers who care only for themselves.”

“Elizabeth,” chided Lady Kinsley, looking shocked. She breathed a nervous laugh. “You only say that because of what has happened, as is natural, I suppose.”

“I do not. I say it because it is true.” She looked directly at the countess. And as she did, she noticed some women over the countess’ shoulder looking directly at the woman. Elizabeth thought perhaps that they

were commenting on the countess' clothes or hair, but their distressed countenances gave the lie to that assumption.

Gossip about the countess? Elizabeth wondered. She thought of Felicia's letter and how she'd said that Hannah and Clarice had used unorthodox methods to try to clear Elizabeth's name. Had they started spreading rumors about the countess instead? If so, how true were they?

Elizabeth kept an eye on the gossiping

ladies without obviously staring at them. As they continued speaking, one of the ladies became so excited and exclaimed so loudly that Elizabeth could hear her say, “*Murder?*”

Her companion shushed her immediately, and they looked away from the countess. Elizabeth met the countess’ stare. Her eyes narrowed, and a hard frown formed on her features. At that moment, Elizabeth thought she saw the truth in her eyes. And it terrified her.

She looked away from Victoria, her heart beating wildly. She had thought that the countess could be dangerous, but she had refused to think of her as a murderer because it was too terrible. But that look in her eyes had been confirmation enough. Elizabeth knew now that the countess had killed her husbands, and perhaps even other men. She did not doubt that her illness before the ball weeks ago had been the work of one of the countess' schemes.

Did she try to kill me? she wondered. Fear

gathered in the pit of her stomach. She remembered the flask that had aroused her suspicions. Even then, she wouldn't have dared to think that murder was in the countess's heart.

“Elizabeth? You look rather pale. Are you well?”

Lady Kinsley's voice broke through her revelation. Elizabeth put a hand to her head and tried to smile. “I am well, only thinking of what has passed. I am afraid I am still quite

troubled.”

Lady Kinsley frowned and put her hand over Elizabeth's in sympathy. “I know, dear. Try, if you can, to enjoy this time we have together now. This is the best tea- room in London. I do not know why I have not brought you here before!”

But Elizabeth couldn't focus on the food or the conversation, and, though she blamed her distraction on her own misery, her mind was really spinning about Victoria. The

thought of sitting right next to a woman so dangerous made her feel sick, and she watched both her and Lady Kinsley's tea carefully throughout the whole meal.

Finally, it was time to leave. They all stood, and Victoria curtsied. "It was wonderful to know you, Lady Elizabeth. I know you will find happiness back home in the country with Lord Huxley." There was a sarcastic gleam in her eyes as she said it.

"I wish you every happiness as well,"

said Elizabeth, not wanting to give away to the countess just how worried she was or how much she knew. The countess left, seeming delighted with the world. As Elizabeth rode back in the carriage with Lady Kinsley, she wondered what to do about her discovery.

“Wasn’t that pleasant, Elizabeth?” Mrs. Kinsley asked. “You cannot say that you didn’t enjoy it.”

“Have you heard anything about the countess?” Elizabeth asked, entirely ignoring

Lady Kinsley's comment. The splendor of the tea-room couldn't have been further from Elizabeth's thoughts.

Mrs. Kinsley seemed to be taken off guard at the question. "Heard anything? Do you mean gossip?" She gasped. "Is there a new rumor I need to warn Victoria of?"

"No!" Elizabeth exclaimed. She cleared her throat and attempted to act more aloof. "No, not at all."

Elizabeth realized then that she couldn't tell her godmother who Victoria truly was. She trusted her friend too much. There was only one other person Elizabeth could confide in.

She had to write to James. No one else would understand. They would simply brush off the accusations and say they were ridiculous or be too afraid to cross the dangerous countess. But James knew the countess and was already wary of her. He would believe Elizabeth; at least, she hoped he would. He hadn't trusted her last time, but this

was different. This was life or death. If Elizabeth didn't tell someone, the countess would go on poisoning people to her heart's content. Perhaps even James.

Elizabeth shuddered at the thought.

As soon as they arrived back at the house, Elizabeth went straight up to her room. She gathered the materials she needed for her letter but paused before she began. Should she apologize to James? Should she tell him how she really felt?

James,

I'm sorry that I have not spoken to you until now. I am sorry for everything that has happened. My feelings were overshadowed by my father's letter and—

Elizabeth sighed with frustration and crumpled up the paper. She shook her head. She had to plainly convey the danger at hand without clouding it with sentiment. Besides, she had had her chance to forgive James

already.

Putting her feelings aside, Elizabeth
focused her thoughts and began writing.

Chapter 30

True to his word, James tried to appear in better spirits, if only for his son. Daniel's words had encouraged him, although he thought them rather idealistic. James thought that possibly, just possibly, there was still a chance. What that chance was, he didn't know.

However, there came a day when hope failed him. Elizabeth was leaving London tomorrow. The thought plagued him all day, making him break his promise to try to be

more cheerful. Despite what Daniel had said, James could no longer see any hope once Elizabeth was back home. Isabelle herself had said that Edward Gladstone would not be forgiving.

These were the thoughts that went through his mind as he walked with Oscar in the garden again, educating him and commenting on the beauty of nature. If anything good had come of this, it was this time he was able to spend with his son.

As they made their way back inside, the butler was waiting for them. “Letter for you, my lord,” he said, offering him a thin, folded paper.

James took it. His heart almost stopped when he saw Elizabeth’s name and recognized her handwriting.

“Oscar,” he said, barely able to produce breath, “go to Miss Ludwig. I must attend to something urgent.”

Oscar nodded silently and ran off. James went to the library and shut the door. He paced for a minute, trying to calm himself before he opened the letter. What could she gain from writing to him? Was she apologizing? If so, it was too late. She was leaving tomorrow. Did she want to see him again before she left? Though it would pain him immensely, James knew he would go if she wanted to see him.

Finally, unable to bear it anymore, he tore open the letter.

Dear James,

Please read this letter with a clear and open mind. The ideas I am about to present to you may be shocking, but I believe you are the only person who will believe me.

James paused, his heart softening. She trusted him to believe her. At the same time, he wondered what on earth she could be talking about.

I must admit to you first that I have had some reservations about the Countess of Chester from the beginning of our acquaintance. I do not wish to gossip, but I know we have spoken of our mutual distaste for her character. However, I have been wondering for quite some time if there may be something more dangerous about her. A conversation I overheard today makes me think that there is.

While at the tearoom today, I overheard some ladies talking about the Countess behind her back. The only word that I heard was “murder.”

The countess heard it too, and when our eyes met, I fear it was made clear to me.

I believe that the countess is very dangerous.

I think it very possible that she killed her husbands and tried to poison me before the ball, when I became very ill. Only now do I remember that I saw her trying to pour me brandy from her own flask one day. I know this may sound too fantastic but believe me when I say that I think she is capable of killing.

James once again stopped, staring open-

mouthed at the letter in his hands. "My God," he breathed. After he collected his thoughts, he continued reading.

I am writing this letter as a warning to you. I do not know what can be done, but if left unchecked, I fear she will do far worse. After I am gone to Deuney Keep, I even fear that she will try to harm you, and I could not bear to leave without letting you know of my suspicions. Please believe me, and if nothing else, be on your guard when you are with her. Do not tell anyone else, especially Lady Kinsley. I do not want the

countess to know of my suspicions for fear that she will do something dangerous.

I am sorry to have to bring this problem to you, but I did not know who else to turn to.

Thank you, James.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Gladstone

James read through the letter twice.
Three times. He tried to wrap his mind around the words, but that wasn't really the problem.

The problem was that he had also sensed that Victoria was dangerous but had never acted upon it. He believed Elizabeth with all his heart. Even aside from his own suspicions, he knew that though Elizabeth might be rebellious and often speak her mind, she was still sensible and intelligent.

His heart also softened at the letter. She hadn't said a word about forgiveness or devotion, but it was evident in every word. If she were still angry with him, if she didn't believe in him, she wouldn't have written.

There was no accusation in the letter, no repetition of what had already been said. She'd shown that she still trusted him.

James folded the letter up and held it tightly in his hand. As Elizabeth had said, he knew it was imperative that he tell no one else of their suspicions. The only way to find the countess out for sure would be to trap her by pretending ignorance of her true character.

James sat in the library, thinking. He started to come up with a plan. Though he

didn't relish the thought of everything he had to do, and though he hated to have to be the one to do it, he knew that the countess had to be brought to justice. Like Elizabeth said, if left unchecked, who knew how much harm the countess could do to others?

Daniel had told him that all hope wasn't lost. And though this had little to do with Elizabeth herself, somehow James had the feeling that was right.

Chapter 31

As Elizabeth watched the familiar countryside pass by the carriage window, the sight of home brought her no comfort, unlike the last time, when she had visited with James. Now it only brought feelings of dread. She knew what was waiting for her. A terrible husband, and unhappiness for the rest of her life.

She caught a glimpse of the seashore and thought of how she and James had ridden down to the water. He had seemed awed by

the sight of the ocean and had claimed he would commission a painting of it from his friend the Earl of Presport.

“It will be our painting,” he’d said, with a smile. She had been able to clearly see the future he was picturing in his mind. *“Every time we look at it, we will think of this.”*

It pained Elizabeth to know that their future together would never be. Every moment in the carriage took her further and further away from James. She would never see him

again.

Drowning in her depressing thoughts, Elizabeth was so wrapped up in misery that she barely noticed when she arrived at Deuney Keep. Her father met her in front of the house, but Elizabeth could not find it within herself to embrace him this time. He wore a frown and a troubled look as if he had already known what to expect.

“Elizabeth...” he said softly, but trailed off, unsure of what to say. After a moment, he

cleared his throat. "I am glad to see you. I am looking forward to spending time with you, even if only for a week."

"It is good to see you too, Father," Elizabeth said. She truly meant it. It was good to see a familiar face, someone whose opinion of her hadn't been influenced by the London gossip.

"How was your journey?" he asked, as he led her inside. "There is a meal waiting for you in the dining room."

“It was difficult, but I am not hungry.”

Edward paused and gazed at her. “You must eat something. You’ve come such a long way.”

“As I said, I am not hungry.” She met his eyes with determination. After a moment, Edward looked away. He had never been able to match her will for very long when it came to most things.

“Very well,” he murmured. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“No. As you have said, the future is already set in stone and cannot be changed.”

She looked out the window. “I am going for a walk. I will try to be back for dinner.”

Edward’s eyes widened. “Aren’t you tired? Are you sure that you should?”

“Yes. I need some fresh air. You do not mind, do you, Father?”

He shook his head slowly. Elizabeth wondered if he would be able to deny her anything, now. He knew the grief he was causing her. “No, just be careful. Try to be back before nightfall.”

Elizabeth left without even changing her dress. Despite the painful memories, she found some semblance of peace in the fields of yellow flowers. She tried very hard not to think of the person who had brought her flowers of that same color when she was ill.

The person she had convinced to climb up into the tree. The person her heart longed for.

Instead, she turned her attention to the calls of the birds. She hadn't forgotten them. They were still as familiar to her as they were the day that she had first left Deuney Keep for London.

London. She wondered if she would ever go back, and if she did, would she find it less odious? First London, then Deuney Keep. Was there nowhere she belonged anymore?

Everywhere was tainted with bad memories and people who didn't understand her.

Elizabeth wandered, until she came to the tree she had climbed with James. She hoisted herself up into the branches and went higher and higher until the branches were so small that they bent under her weight. Her lips twitched into a smile, as she considered that James would be terrified if he could see her now.

She gazed out above the world, the

setting sun painting everything in reddish hues. Such beauty amidst the sadness. Nature didn't care about her worries. It didn't bend to the troubles of people. Nature was constant.

Elizabeth sighed. At least that was one thing that wouldn't change. She could always rely on the outdoors to soothe her spirits. It was the one friend that would never desert her.

Elizabeth suddenly recalled having a similar thought while she was out among the

flowers before she left for London. Irony was cruel. She had been alone then, and she was alone now. She would always be alone. After she was married to an old brute of a man, how could she have anyone to confide in?

Elizabeth became aware of a creaking sound. It took her a moment to surface from her thoughts and realize that the branch she stood on was giving way. Heart pounding, she jumped to another branch just as the one beneath her feet snapped and fell to the ground far below.

Trying to catch her breath, Elizabeth scrambled further down the tree. She needed someone to remind her of her limits, she realized. Someone to keep her grounded. If she could create her own world with her own rules, then she would; but for now, she needed someone to bring her back to the world she lived in.

Someone like James.

Elizabeth leaped to the ground and sank

into a sitting position. It was in that moment she knew that she still loved him, and she probably always would.

* * *

Elizabeth awoke three days later, still hoping that it was all a nightmare. And yet she awakened in the same bed that she'd slept in since she was a child, in the same room, in the same house. She'd barely had enough energy to get out of bed the previous two days, and today was no different. With a groan, Elizabeth rolled over onto her side. She

wished she could just stay here and never move again.

Still, she knew from her first morning back home that her father would be upset if she didn't at least join him for breakfast. She made herself presentable before going downstairs to the dining room. Her father was just beginning breakfast.

“Good morning, Elizabeth. How did you sleep?”

“I slept well,” she said quietly, as she sat, keeping her gaze downcast. She pushed food around on her plate but didn’t eat anything. She hadn’t felt like eating since she had arrived.

“Elizabeth,” Edward said, after a long silence, “you must try to return to normal. This is not the end of your life. It is merely a new beginning. It will not be as bad as you think.”

Elizabeth nodded, too weary to even

think of a reply.

“Please eat something, at least. I have been watching you merely move food around your plate for the past three days.”

“I am not hungry this morning.” She could feel her father’s eyes on her, but she refused to look up at him. It became totally silent in the room as he stopped eating.

“My child,” he began, “it is necessary for you to marry Lord Huxley. If there were

another option, I would take it. I do not want you to be unhappy, and I truly do not think you will be. This must happen. You know it must.”

“I know, Father. I have already accepted it.” There was no more arguing, no more thoughts of running away. This was her fate, this was what she had caused, and she would accept it.

Edward shifted in his seat and didn't touch his food. “I have arranged for Lord

Huxley to come for a visit in two days' time," he said. "I know it has been a long time since you have met with him. I daresay, Elizabeth, you will find him quite amiable."

Elizabeth remembered the last time she had seen Lord Huxley at dinner with her father, his face red with drunkenness and his laughter loud and boisterous. He had scared her. She doubted he had changed at all unless he had grown even uglier.

Later that day, as Elizabeth tried to find

something to occupy her mind, she ended up falling onto her bed and crying. She couldn't help it. The thoughts of James and everything she had lost were too much to bear.

Her maid must have told her father, because a while later, after her bed was soaked with tears, Edward came into her room.

“My dear child,” he said, putting a hand on her back. “I never wanted to cause you so much pain.”

Elizabeth continued crying. She would have been happy with James. If only she hadn't been so stupid and stubborn.

“I truly believe you are making it worse than it will be. You will be married and living in comfort.” He tried to laugh a little. “You will no longer be subjected to my ordering you about.”

Elizabeth sat up and wrapped her arms around her father. “I would so much rather

stay here with you, Father.”

“It will be all right, Elizabeth,” he said, returning the embrace. “Just wait until you see Lord Huxley. Then you will know that what I say is true.”

Elizabeth couldn't bring herself to get up from her bed for the rest of the day. Her father came regularly to check on her, becoming increasingly concerned.

Try as she might, Elizabeth couldn't get

her mind out of the depression it was in. She wondered if that was who she was now. Gone was the cheerful, carefree Elizabeth who laughed and talked freely. In her place was a sad, lonely woman who would be no better than a prisoner for the rest of her life.

Chapter 32

James read Elizabeth's letter several times over the next several days, not only because he could see her penmanship and imagine her writing the letter, but also because he knew he needed to create a foolproof plan to deal with Victoria.

Each time he read the letter several ideas came to mind. He didn't want to tell Victoria outright that he knew what she was up to, for fear she might run or hide all the evidence that would prove her guilty.

After much deliberation, James thought he had a sound plan mapped out in his mind. The more he considered it, the more he thought it just might work.

“You seem to be feeling better, James,” his mother commented one morning.

James shook himself from his thoughts. He hadn’t told anyone about Elizabeth’s revelation about the countess, and he didn’t intend to, unless it was someone who could

bring the countess to justice. “I have found something with which to occupy my time.”

Erin raised her eyebrows. “Oh?”

“I will tell you when the time is right. For now, I have important business to attend to.”

He excused himself from breakfast and went to his writing desk. This was the first step in his plan.

James thought hard before beginning.

Though it took much fabrication and effort on

his part, he wrote the letter like one who was enchanted and in love. The countess was clever; she might find it strange if he suddenly claimed to have affection for her, but if he flattered her enough, her vanity might just overtake her wits.

Dear Victoria,

I regret that we have not been able to see each other recently, my dear friend. I do confess that I have been upset about Elizabeth's departure to Deuney Keep, but during my musings I realized

that I have overlooked a very important woman who has been in my life for a long time—you.

James sighed and had to stop for a moment. It was going to take everything he had to execute this correctly.

It would please me greatly if you would pay me a visit soon, so that we may spend the day together. There is a very urgent matter that I must discuss with you.

Please reply to me as soon as possible, so

that we may set a date. Any day will suit me.

Sincerely,

James Graham, Duke of Darrington

James finished and massaged his temples, glad that it was over. He read over the letter a few times, deemed it sufficient and sealed it. He called for his butler and asked that the letter be posted immediately.

James's heart pumped wildly as the letter was taken away. He found this all quite

exciting. It gave him something to occupy his mind, and, if nothing else, if the ruse worked, he would have something to write to Elizabeth about. Surely, she would want to be reassured that he had heeded her warning and was working to put a stop Victoria's treacherous ways.

Now, all he had to do was wait.

* * *

It did not take long at all for the countess to reply.

The next day, James received a letter first thing in the morning. He quickly scanned over Victoria's reply.

Dear James,

It would be my pleasure to spend a day with you. It has been so long since I have spent time with you or even seen you happy. I believe that we will have a wonderful day together.

Does tomorrow suit you? We might as well

not delay. I look forward to your company, and whatever it is you would like to discuss with me.

Your friend,

Victoria Blackwood, Countess of Chester

James smiled. It didn't seem as though she suspected anything. Just as he had hoped, she had been taken in by his charm. He replied immediately, telling her that tomorrow would suit him perfectly, and he was looking forward to seeing her. The letter was dispatched, and James ordered his carriage.

He had a visit to pay.

The carriage took him to Bow Street in London, the home of the Bow Street Runners. Through James's influence, he had come to know one of the constables personally. He had told James to contact him if he ever needed anything. James thought that now was undoubtedly the right time to call in a favor.

James was directly admitted into the building. He asked after the constable, Mr. Lock, and a servant rushed off to find him.

James heard raised voices and imagined that there must be a court in session in the next room. It was only a few minutes before the servant returned with Mr. Lock in tow.

James smiled and shook hands with the man. “My lord,” he said. “What can I do for you?” Mr. Lock asked.

“There is a rather delicate matter I would like to speak to you about. Is there an office where we may converse?” James was all too conscious of the noise from the next room and

the people who might be listening in.

Mr. Lock smiled. “Certainly, my lord.” He led James to a small office on the ground floor and closed the door behind him.

“Mr. Lock,” began James, “I believe that I am acquainted with someone who has committed at least two murders and has attempted at least one other.” He sighed. It felt like a relief to say it out loud.

Mr. Lock’s mouth opened in shock. He

huffed. “That is an incredible accusation. What proof do you have?”

“That’s what I need your help with.”

James licked his lips. “This is quite a delicate matter, as it involves a rather prominent lady, the Countess of Chester.”

Mr. Lock hummed in thought and nodded. “I see, sir.”

“I do not think she knows that I am suspicious of her, but I have been cautious,

nonetheless. I have invited her to spend the day with me tomorrow. While she is with me, perhaps you and a few fellow constables could search her house for any evidence against her. I believe her preferred method is poison.”

Mr. Lock frowned, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “How did you form your suspicions?”

“A reliable source. She was the victim of an attempted poisoning. She said that the countess had her own flask, which most likely

contains the poison.”

“Very well, my lord. I believe we can help.” Lock sighed, shaking his head. “This is very serious if it is, indeed, true.”

“Yes, I know. We have settled the time for eleven o’clock tomorrow, so she will be absent from her house from then on. Once you have finished your search, call on me. I will make sure the countess remains at my house.”

“You can count on us, my lord. If she is

hiding anything, we will find it.”

“Thank you, Mr. Lock. Your cooperation is very much appreciated. Good luck tomorrow.”

“You too, my lord.” He looked at James seriously. “I would keep an eye on her. If she is capable of poisoning people, I wouldn’t turn my back for a moment, if I were you.”

“I appreciate your concern, constable. I will take every precaution.” After bidding the

constable farewell, James left and made his way back home. He found himself a little breathless, as he considered what a vile crime Victoria had committed. He desperately hoped that this plan would work. It had to.

Once he arrived home, he immediately went to see his mother. “Mother,” he said, finding her in the garden. “I am going to have a visitor tomorrow. It is a matter of great importance, and there is a possibility of danger, so I must ask you and Oscar to remain upstairs.”

She blinked in alarm. “James, what on earth have you got yourself into?”

“Do not worry, Mother. I will be perfectly safe, and so will you. I have a plan, and I do not want anything to interfere with it.”

“Can’t you tell me, James?”

“For now, I must ask you to trust me. You will find out in good time, though I fear it will not be good news.”

When Erin continued to look distressed, James gently gripped her arms. “Please trust me, Mother. All I ask is that you stay upstairs and look after Oscar and Miss Ludwig for me.”

“Of course, my dear.” Erin managed a small smile. “I do trust you.

Thank you.” He kissed her cheek. “All will be well by this time tomorrow.” As James walked back toward the house he muttered, “At least I certainly hope so.”

Chapter 33

“Elizabeth, you look wonderful,” Edward Gladstone said, with a sincere smile.

Elizabeth looked down at the beautiful blue gown her father had bought for her. Before putting it on, her maid had spent hours braiding and styling her hair, but when Elizabeth had looked in the mirror, she had seen clearly that all the glamour in the world couldn't hide the miserable look on her face. Her eyes had gazed back at her without any spark of life in them.

“Thank you, Father.” She couldn’t even find it within herself to return the smile. When was the last time she had felt like smiling?

Edward’s countenance became grave, as he walked to Elizabeth and clasped her hand in both of his. “I beg you to receive Lord Huxley with an open mind tonight. He is our last hope.”

Elizabeth nodded. She didn’t have the stamina to argue anymore. She was so starved

and tired that even just saying a few words took almost too much effort. “Do not worry. I will be on my best behavior.”

The butler opened the front door and announced Lord Huxley. He entered with a grin, his eyes wandering over the furnishings in the foyer.

Elizabeth found that he was just as her memory had preserved him. She almost smiled for a moment as she remembered comparing him to a dog with Felicia, because that was

almost exactly what he looked like. His form was stout, and his stomach protruded far from his body, though his clothes hung loosely about him. He had a square, flat head with loose cheeks just like a bulldog's. Spots on his skin told of his age.

“Edward!” Lord Huxley exclaimed loudly.

“William,” Edward said with a smile, shaking his hand warmly. “It is so good to see you again.” He stepped to the side. “You remember my daughter, Elizabeth?”

A look of greed flashed in Lord Huxley's eyes, as he gazed at Elizabeth. He bowed with a wide grin. "It is a pleasure to see you again, my lady. You have blossomed since you were a child."

Elizabeth wanted to squirm under his appraising gaze and looked away.

"She has, hasn't she?" agreed Edward.

"The last time you visited, she was only thirteen. Now, she is a lady who has mingled

with the highest of society. As I told you in my letter, she has just come back from London.”

“London!” Lord Huxley exclaimed. “Such a wonderful place.”

Elizabeth found just enough defiance within her to state, “I did not find it so. I found it rather odious.”

Lord Huxley snorted. “That’s because you didn’t go to the right places. Your guardian probably took you to tearooms and libraries.

That's all well and good when you're a lady, but the places for a man to visit in London are far superior." He chuckled heartily and patted Edward on the shoulder. "Isn't that right, Edward?"

Edward nodded absently and cleared his throat. "Shall we move to the dining room?"

Lord Huxley was seated next to Elizabeth at dinner. If she hadn't already lost her appetite, she certainly would have by watching the way he ate. He chewed loudly

and spoke with food in his mouth, laughing often and casting spittle everywhere. Elizabeth kept her head down and averted her eyes from him. She felt like she was going to be sick.

“What’s wrong?” He bumped her shoulder with his elbow. “You haven’t eaten a single thing.”

Elizabeth recoiled from the point of contact and scooted to the edge of her chair as far away from him as she could possibly get.

“Please, sir, do not touch me in such a familiar

way.”

Lord Huxley laughed loudly. “Why not? You’re going to be my wife in a few days, aren’t you?”

Elizabeth couldn’t take it anymore. Fearing that she might actually be sick, she breathlessly excused herself and fled from the room. Once she was outside, she paused and breathed in lungful’s of fresh air.

“I can’t do this,” she whispered to herself.

Immediately, her father's words came back to her. *"He is our last hope."*

Elizabeth put a hand over her mouth to stifle a rising sob. Tears flowed down her cheeks. This couldn't be her life, trapped and confined, destined to marry a man who was everything she despised.

After a few minutes, she calmed herself and found a handkerchief with which to wipe her tears. It was only after her tears were dried that she realized it was James'

handkerchief, given to her so long ago.

She put the handkerchief away before she could think about it any longer and went back to the dining room. Lord Huxley chortled as she took her place beside him again.

“Is anything amiss, my lady?”

Elizabeth met her father’s eyes across the table. His look gave her was a silent warning.

“I was feeling ill for a moment, but I

believe that I am better now.” She forced herself to eat a few bites of dinner, though she couldn’t savor the taste at all.

After dinner, Lord Huxley expressed a wish to play cards. The card table was fetched, and a game of Speculation was declared.

“Speculation is the best game ever devised,” said Lord Huxley as the cards were dealt. “Don’t you agree, Elizabeth?”

Elizabeth bit her tongue to keep from

commenting on how she loathed his informal address. However, spending time with Lord Huxley was invigorating her spirit somewhat. She replied, “I prefer chess to cards, Lord Huxley. I enjoy games of strategy that test the mind.”

Lord Huxley scoffed and proceeded to lose the round of cards. He suggested a different game, which he also lost. Elizabeth hid a smile when he became flustered.

“I am not in good spirits tonight. It has

been years since I have lost a card game,” he said, throwing his hand onto the table and scattering the cards everywhere.

“Everyone has those kinds of days,” Edward consoled. “No doubt your luck will return in the next game.”

Lord Huxley sighed. “It is getting late. I think I shall return home.” He stood and said his goodbyes to Edward, then Elizabeth.

“It has been a pleasure,” he said, kissing

her hand.

Elizabeth tried hard not to grimace in disgust. Lord Huxley leaving her and her father in the foyer.

“Thank you, Elizabeth,” Edward said. “I know he is not the best of men, but—”

“No,” Elizabeth cut him off. “He is not even close to the best.” Even her own father thought he was ridiculous, and still he was

going to marry her off to him. “Excuse me, Father, but I am tired. Goodnight.” She went up to her room and sat on her bed, feeling drained. Her stomach grumbled. She couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten a real meal.

Tonight’s events had proven Elizabeth’s fears to be correct. Huxley was just as vile and rude as she had remembered, and in only a few days she would be his wife.

The worst part was that she had no one

in whom to confide. She had to bear this all on her own, suffering in silence. Her father was too focused on marrying her off. Her godmother wouldn't understand. James was out of the question. Felicia...

Elizabeth hadn't written to her friend yet, as she had promised. Invigorated by the thought, she sat down and began a letter.

Dear Felicia,

My life is a nightmare. Lord Huxley is just

as awful as we thought he would still be. Perhaps he is even worse. I do not know what to do. I have not eaten. I have barely slept. I do not know how I can go through with marrying this vile man. There is no one on whom I can count.

Elizabeth stopped and let her head fall into her hands. She couldn't send this to Felicia. She was courting the Earl of Presport. She shouldn't have to worry about Elizabeth.

"I can rely on no one," she murmured to herself. This was her lot in life from now on.

To be alone.

Chapter 34

“What is happening, Father? Why can’t I play downstairs or in the garden?”

Miss Ludwig shushed Oscar as he spouted questions, but James knelt in front of his son and answered, “I have a very important visitor today, Oscar. If the visit goes well, I will have a fantastic tale to tell you later. But,” he added in a whisper, “we must not be disturbed. I have a secret that not even your Grandmother knows yet.”

Oscar's eyes swept to Erin's. She nodded at him gravely.

“So,” James continued, “that is why I am asking you to remain upstairs with Grandmother and Miss Ludwig. It will not be for more than a few hours, I hope.” He stood to his feet and met Miss Ludwig's and his mother's eyes. “I promise no harm will come to you. I do not believe you are in danger, but I would like to know you are safe up here, just in case.”

As James bent down to kiss his mother's cheek, she whispered, "Be careful, James."

He pressed her hand. "I will."

James went to his room and rechecked his appearance in the mirror. Not a hair was out of place, and there was not a wrinkle to be seen on his clothes. He noticed that his hands were shaking.

He was nervous. The countess herself didn't unnerve him, but he kept fearing that

somehow his plan would go wrong and something terrible would happen. He recalled Mr. Lock's warnings from the previous day. James resolved to watch the countess more closely than he ever had before.

James glanced at the clock and saw it was almost time. He went down to the garden where tea was already laid out. He sat in a chair but couldn't keep his toes from tapping impatiently on the ground. After a few minutes, the butler approached.

“The Countess of Chester, my lord.”

The countess walked toward him with a wide smile, her dark eyes glittering with delight, as she saw James. She wore an elegant dark green gown with silk gloves and a necklace of precious stones that glittered in the sunlight.

“James, how wonderful to see you! I was so glad to receive your invitation. It has been so long since we have been able to spend time together, just the two of us!”

James stood to receive the countess. He took her hand and bowed, pressing a kiss to the back of her hand. Internally, he recoiled as his lips touched her skin, but he had already determined that flattery put the countess off guard. It was something he would have to endure.

She looked absolutely delighted as James straightened up. “It is such a pleasure to have you here with me today, countess.” He gestured for her to sit, and took his place

across from her, as tea was served.

“I must admit that your letter did surprise me, however happy I was to receive it.” She lightly brushed his hand. “I am so glad that you have come to your senses.”

James fought to hold his tongue at the words that were obviously meant as a slight against Elizabeth. “I confess that I have missed your company recently.” He took a sip of his tea, hoping it would help to calm him.

“And I have missed yours. It really was so kind of you to invite me for the day. Where is your mother? And your son?”

“Upstairs. I have asked for us not to be disturbed.”

Victoria's lips curled into a satisfied smile. James loathed the very sight of her, the look of greed in her eyes. He tapped his foot again and pressed his lips together, trying to think of what he could talk about.

“How is Isabelle?” he asked. “Have you seen her since Elizabeth left?”

“I fear she has been a little lonely without your company. I have been trying to keep her occupied, telling her that Elizabeth was a lost cause anyway. I think she blames herself for how the girl turned out, but really it wasn’t her fault.”

James bristled. He wondered if the constables were already at Victoria’s house, searching. Had they found anything yet?

Would they find anything? And how long would it take?

As tea progressed, Victoria moved her chair closer to James. “There is no need for us to be so far apart,” she explained, with a laugh.

“Indeed, forgive me for not having the table arranged more suitably.”

Victoria shook her head, placing her hand on James’s. “You are always so humble,

James. Not everything is your fault.” She gazed into his eyes, smiling. “Though I suppose,” she continued, in a softer voice, “it is one of your most endearing qualities.”

James grabbed his teacup as an excuse for having something to do. “Have you finished?” he asked, glancing at her hardly touched plate.

“I am, yes, but it is such a lovely day. Let us stay out here for a little longer.”

“Very well. The weather is indeed beautiful today.”

As the countess laughed and talked, James did his best to comment and flatter wherever he could. After taking several of these compliments, the countess sighed and said, “I always knew our attraction was mutual, James. Some things have come between us in the past, but I am glad that we can acknowledge it now.”

“You are unlike any woman I have ever

met,” he said, which was the truth. Just not in the way she thought he meant.

“I have so few friends, you know. Not many people appreciate my view of the world. My life has been hard. I have always had to struggle. First, when I was young, and then after my husbands died. I have learned many hard lessons in my life, and people often mistake my wisdom for pride.”

James tried not to roll his eyes. He wondered what the poor urchins in the streets

would have to say about her “difficult life.”

“I know you understand me.” She placed a hand on his arm. “You have been my greatest friend, James. And as your friend and admirer, I must tell you that I am so glad you were able to overcome the grief from losing Elizabeth. You would have been miserable with her, believe me.” Her fingers added pressure to his arm. “Don’t you think we make a better pair?”

James nearly ruined the plan then and

there, but he forced himself to say. “Yes. I do not see how I was so blind to it before. Your intelligence and grace have charmed me ever since the beginning. I was a fool for not seeing it sooner.”

Victoria raised her eyebrows and huffed. “It was that girl, Elizabeth. I knew you could not truly see anything in her, but you felt forced to marry her because of her circumstances.”

James clenched his hand into a fist under

the table. His nails bit into his palm. “Yes, it was simply out of kindness.”

James looked at the door to the house, hoping that the butler would appear and save them by telling James the constables were here. He wasn't sure how long he could keep this up.

Chapter 35

At breakfast, the morning after Lord Huxley's visit, Elizabeth was the furthest from hunger she had ever been, and she felt faint. She nibbled on a slice of toast to please her father and drank some tea.

“What are your thoughts after last night, Elizabeth?”

She looked into his eyes. “It does not matter what I think. You know what a terrible man he is, and yet you are forcing me to

marry him anyway.”

Edward coughed as he choked on his food in surprise. “Elizabeth, you cannot say such a thing! I thought we were past this!”

“Did you see the way he looked at me, Father?” she asked, unable to keep from raising her voice. It was the first time she had done so in a long time. “He saw me as some sort of trophy. He did not even consider me a person with a mind and a heart. He is not even intelligent, and he eats like an animal. Even

when he played cards he acted like a fool! I know you realize how vile he is.”

Edward remained silent, staring hard at his plate.

“I am sorry, Father,” Elizabeth added, more softly. “I know he is your friend, and perhaps he really is a good friend to you. But the way he acted towards me was unforgivable in my eyes. I had hoped it was in yours, too.”

Edward simply sighed. He set down his

utensils, stood up, and walked away silently.

Elizabeth had never seen him do such a thing and knew he must be truly troubled. But he wasn't disappointed in her. If that were the case, he would have said so.

Elizabeth wondered if she had finally got through to him and made him see how odious Huxley was. At least it seemed she had gotten him to think about it.

Elizabeth sat in the dining room, not touching her food, simply thinking. Edward

came back in after several minutes bearing what looked like an old letter, still sealed. He clasped it in his hands, fidgeting as he pinched the corners.

He sighed. "Elizabeth, I know this is a difficult time for you. Please believe me when I say that it is difficult for me, too. I believe I have something for you that will lift your spirits." He handed the letter to her.

Elizabeth took it and frowned, turning it over in her hands. Her name was written on it

in flowing script, but nothing else. The writing looked vaguely familiar.

“It is from your mother,” Edward said softly.

Elizabeth gasped and met his eyes.

“Mother?”

“She wrote it for you, just before...” He trailed off, avoiding her eyes. “She spent all the energy she had left writing this for you. She asked me to give it to you once you were

grown or about to be married. I thought that now might be the right time.”

Elizabeth’s eyes filled with tears. She hugged her father tightly. “Thank you, Father.” She looked at the sealed letter again. “I think I need to be alone to read this. I will ride down to the seashore.”

“Very well, my child. Be safe.”

Elizabeth grabbed her cloak, tucked the letter safely away in a pocket, and went out to

the stables to have her horse saddled. She had been walking around in the fields so often in the past several days that she needed a change of scenery. She wanted plenty of space to think as she read through her mother's letter.

Of course, she had considered that a visit to the seashore would bring back memories of her time there with James, but at this point, anything would. Overall, she thought that the ride would clear her head and help focus her mind.

Once Elizabeth was off, she smiled for the first time in days. She had missed the feeling of the wind blowing in her face, the sweet smell of the sea air. Her horse seemed to have missed it too, because he sped off toward the ocean as if running a race.

Elizabeth laughed sadly. *Oh, to be a horse with not a care in the world and nature as your home.* Unlike her horse, Elizabeth knew that she could never outrun her fate. Her life was going to end in two days.

Elizabeth patted her horse's neck. "Be glad you do not have to marry," she said, "or worry about estates and money."

Elizabeth let those thoughts subside and instead focused on the sensations of riding. She had let down her hair, so it flew out behind her like a banner in the wind. The rhythmic, even thudding of the horse's hooves was a comfort.

"It is soothing in a way, is it not?" A memory of her talking to James while on this

very same path came to her mind. *“The sound is so constant and the horses’ steps so sure that it is comforting. I think that is one of my favorite things about riding.”*

James had hummed in thought, a small smile on his face. *“I confess that I have never thought of it like that. But yes, I suppose it is rather soothing. For me, it is about freedom.”* He looked into her eyes. *“I am held to such a high standard by society, as I know you understand, but out here, on a horse in the country, I am not the Duke of Darrington. I am simply James*

Graham.”

“You no longer have a title?” Elizabeth had said in mock horror. “Then I am afraid, sir, that I must call off our engagement. I cannot marry a simple James Graham. I must marry a duke.”

James had laughed heartily at her jesting. Elizabeth had joined in and thought she didn’t have a care in the world.

The memory faded. Elizabeth sighed and looked ahead. The ocean was just coming into

view. The wind blew harder, and Elizabeth could even hear the waves crashing on the shore.

She coaxed her horse into a gallop and kept him going until they reached the shore. Elizabeth slowed him to a trot, then a walk. After a few minutes, she dismounted and took the reins in her hand.

Elizabeth stood still for a long moment. She let her boots sink into the sand, as she gazed out over the ocean. It was so beautiful,

calming, and constant. The crashing waves created a subtle symphony that helped clear her head as the wind whistled wildly in her ears.

Elizabeth sighed and sat back on the sand. Her horse stomped his feet and snorted.

“Do you ever wonder what it would be like to sail across the ocean?” James’ voice came back to her.

“When I was a child, I did. But as I grew

up, I knew that I would hate being confined on a ship for weeks.” She had looked over at him as they stood beside each other in the sand.

“Have you ever been on a ship?”

“No.” He had smiled a little. *“It was a dream of mine when I was a boy. I wanted to be an explorer and sail around the world. It would be a fantastic adventure.”*

Elizabeth had smiled at the feeling in his words. *“I have always thought that I enjoy the waves much better from here. I will take*

adventure as long as it is in the open country.”

“I would expect nothing less of you,” James had agreed. She missed being able to confide in him. She missed his smile. She missed everything about him.

She remembered her letter to him about Victoria. She had not received a reply, but she had left London the very next day. She wondered if James had believed her. Perhaps he had simply dismissed her suspicions as foolish. Perhaps her warning about the

countess *had* just been fueled by jealousy and dislike.

But Elizabeth remembered the way the countess had looked at her. It was a look of recognition, of admittance. She knew what she was and what she had done. Elizabeth had seen it clearly in her eyes.

Fear gripped her heart. What if James hadn't heeded her warning? What if Victoria was going after him or Lady Kinsley?

Elizabeth shuddered. The wind was starting to chill her, piercing through her cloak. But she knew it wasn't just the cold. Yes, she would be plunged into eternal misery in two days, but what if her friends in London were in danger? *Real* danger? She was more concerned for them than she was for herself.

She thought of writing to James and making sure he was well, but her father wouldn't allow it, she knew, and if James hadn't answered the first letter, then why should he answer this one?

Elizabeth drew her knees to her chest and sighed, feeling tears prick her eyes. She wasn't one to cry much, but it seemed as if she had cried enough tears for a lifetime in just the past few days.

Elizabeth knew exactly what she needed—the comfort of her mother. She drew her mother's letter from her cloak's pocket and unfolded the deep creases. The wind tugged at the paper, but she held it firmly in her grasp.

My dearest daughter,

Elizabeth paused, smiling at the endearment. It had been a long time since someone had used an endearment for her so sincerely as her mother had.

From what I have been told, it seems that I may not have long left to be with you. There are so many things I wanted to teach you when you grew into a young lady. I can only imagine how you will look and act while reading this. I picture you as the same stubborn, free girl who ran

around in the yellow flowers and climbed the trees without fear. I also picture a woman who has a strong, loving heart that is capable of so much care and devotion. I know that you will marry well and marry from your heart rather than according to the pressures of society. I wish I could meet the man who is worthy of you.

Elizabeth cried. If her mother had been here, she would have mended the situation. She would have knocked some sense into her father. She would never have dreamed of making Elizabeth marry Lord Huxley.

I ask you to be gracious towards your father. He is worried about you, but only because he wants what is best. He wants you to have a good, full life, and he is always concerned he will not be able to provide that for you. You must always remind him that you love him. Do not be too hard on him. Forgive him. I know how the two of you can disagree on every subject.

Elizabeth laughed a little, despite her tears.

I still have hope that I will live through this.

If I didn't have that hope, I would have given up already, but if I am not there for you as you grow older, please remember this. Be yourself. Live freely. Laugh, even when others do not. Do not let anybody else tell you who you are and remember that no matter where you find yourself or who you are with, no one can control your actions. Only you can make your decisions in the end. Never despair, my darling Elizabeth.

With love,

Your mother, Jane Gladstone

Elizabeth breathed out a long sigh and sobbed, folding up the letter again so it wouldn't be damaged by her tears. She tucked it back inside her cloak securely. Her mother had told her not to fear anything. She had said that no one could make a choice for her.

Elizabeth stood up. If only her mother could have known about this choice. She couldn't refuse her father's order to marry Lord Huxley. That would send them both into ruin forever. What else could she do?

What would her mother do?

Elizabeth wandered along the shore, her mind completely occupied with her problem.

Chapter 36

James shifted in his seat, more uncomfortable than ever. He found his eyes constantly straying to the door of the house, waiting for word from the constables. He could hardly stand the sound of the countess's voice anymore.

“...after Charles passed away, of course,” the countess was saying, as James was deliberately not paying attention. Then, he had an idea.

“How did your husbands die?” James asked. “It must have been difficult to have both of them pass away.”

Her eyes widened the tiniest bit. “Why do you have such a sudden interest?”

“I simply want to understand your past. I find it interesting.”

Victoria frowned and shifted in her chair, but just as she took in a breath, James heard footsteps and turned his head. He was

infinitely relieved to see the butler walking toward them.

“You are needed in the foyer, my lord. I am told it is very urgent.”

“Oh dear,” murmured the countess.

“Nothing serious, I hope?” Relief at the distraction showed in her eyes.

James waved it off. “I am sure it is nothing. Please, stay here. I will only be gone a moment.” James gave her a charming smile,

and she seemed to relax. He stood and followed the butler back into the house. His heart began to race.

Mr. Lock was waiting in the foyer with three other constables. He nodded to James. “Good afternoon, my lord.”

“It is good to see you, Mr. Lock, though I wish it were under better circumstances. Have you found anything?”

“Indeed, we have.” He held up a flask

with ruby liquid inside. “It has been checked, and it is certainly poison. Enough to kill if the right amount is administered.”

Elizabeth was right, he thought. He had never doubted her, but it was incredible to have proof all the same. He found himself relieved and nervous at the same time.

“What would you like us to do, my lord?”

Mr. Lock asked.

“I would like to hear a confession. If you

will allow me, please let me take the flask.

Wait in my drawing room, if you will, and I will arrange for the butler to fetch you when the time is right.”

“Very well, my lord,” said Mr. Lock.

James pulled his butler aside and spoke to him in a hushed tone. “Please wait on these guests and provide them with anything they need. Wait for me at the back window. When I look at you and give a wave with my hand, lead the constables out to the garden. They

will know what to do from there.” As a sudden thought occurred to him, he added, “And follow me out first with two brandy glasses.”

The butler agreed, fetched two empty glasses, and walked back to the garden just ahead of James. “Thank you,” James said once the glasses were set down. He dismissed the butler and turned back to Victoria.

He smiled, still standing, and used his grasp on the flask to hide it from her view. “I thought you might like some brandy.”

“Oh yes, that was very thoughtful of you, James. I think some brandy would be just the thing.”

“Indeed.” James poured some of the ruby liquid from the flask into both glasses. He handed one to Victoria and sat down beside her.

“Before you drink, I’d like to tell you this,” he began. A look of glee spread across the countess’ expression, and James realized

she probably thought he was going to propose.

“The brandy is yours,” he continued. “I thought you might like to drink your own, as it seems to be your favorite. You always carry it around.”

James placed the flask just in front of her. The countess stared at it, open-mouthed. The color drained from her face. “Where..., where did you get that?” she stammered.

“You dropped it.”

The countess stared at her glass, then looked away. She cleared her throat and tried to regain her smile, but James could see her fingers trembling.

“Have you heard anything from Elizabeth?” she asked suddenly. “She is to be married to Lord Huxley in only a couple of days, from what I have heard.”

He paused, deliberating, but decided to say, “I did receive a letter from her just before she left, warning me about one of my

acquaintances who she thought might be dangerous.”

The countess began fanning herself and attempted an airy laugh. “Ah, silly girl. She always had the most foolish notions. A rather stupid creature if I might say so.”

That was when James had had enough. He was done with playacting and knew that the countess was too prideful to admit to her crimes. “No. You may not say so now, or ever again.” James stood, unable to contain his

emotions any longer. His voice rose like it hadn't in years, and he saw the countess's eyes widen in fear.

“Elizabeth is the brightest and most sincere woman I've ever met. Most of all, she is trustworthy, unlike you. You could never even hope to measure up to her, despite all your wealth and status. You have never even turned my head, Victoria.”

She gasped, consternation clear in her expression. She stood to face him. “How dare

you insult me in such a way!” Her face was red. “Your defense of her just proves what I feared all along. You were taken in by her charm. *I* am the one who has loved you, James, the one who has always been here. Ever since I have known you, I have loved you.”

James thought of the way he loved Elizabeth. His heart longed for her, and he knew that he would do anything for her. He had never seen an ounce of love in anything the countess had ever done.

James scoffed. "Love? You claim to know what love is? You, whom I doubt has ever loved anyone? You do not know the first thing about love. Someone who has done the things that you have done has no heart at all. The only thing you feel, Victoria, is greed." James looked to the side and met the eyes of his butler through the window. He discreetly waved, and the butler nodded and disappeared. He looked back at the countess. She was steaming with anger.

“You stupid man!” she exclaimed. “You know nothing of the world at all. You are just like that girl, so blind to everything but yourself! You—” She paused as a group of heavy footsteps came close. Her face turned white as she looked over James’ shoulder, and she backed up a step.

“No,” she breathed.

James stepped back and allowed the constables to apprehend the countess.

“Victoria Blackwood, Countess of Chester,” Mr. Lock said in an authoritative voice. “You are under arrest for the murder of Charles Blackwood and William Reeves as well, as the attempted murder of Lady Elizabeth Gladstone.”

“No!” she screamed, struggling against the constables. “No, it is not true! James!” She met his eyes desperately. “James, please tell them that it is not true.”

James glanced at the flask on the table

and shook his head. "I wish that I could, Countess, but I am an honest man." He sighed. "I truly wish that you had chosen a better path, but I will not allow you to continue like this."

She screamed again as the constables escorted her away. James slumped into a chair and rubbed his forehead. He did feel a kind of pity for her, but mostly he was relieved. Everyone was safe, and the Countess of Chester would never poison anyone ever again.

Chapter 37

“Elizabeth!”

Her father’s voice sounded overly cheery as Elizabeth entered the parlor. She tried to smile at him, but it was as if her lips didn’t even remember how to smile anymore.

“I have missed you all day,” Edward continued. He was in the middle of afternoon tea and gestured to the seat across from him.

“I’m sorry,” Elizabeth said as she took the

seat. She had a full view of the window, and the sunlight shining into the room made her head throb. “I have not felt well enough to rise until now.”

Edward ordered Elizabeth’s plate filled with food. Elizabeth simply watched as the cakes and sandwiches piled up on her plate. She already knew that she wasn’t going to eat anything.

“Please eat, Elizabeth,” pleaded Edward. The phrase was beginning to sound so wearily

repetitive. “You have not had anything all day. Look,” he added with a smile, “your favorite sandwiches!”

“I appreciate your effort, Father, but I am still not hungry.” She took a few sips of tea, hoping that it would appease him.

Edward heaved a great sigh. “Elizabeth, please tell me what I can do.”

Elizabeth paused then looked into her father’s eyes. “You would not understand, as

much as you try. I feel like I am a piece of property being sold off, not a woman being given in marriage.”

“You will be in good hands after tomorrow, Elizabeth. I will ensure it.”

Tomorrow. Elizabeth couldn’t believe that the minutes and hours were still passing, that the day was drawing nearer and nearer.

“What if you are wrong? What if I am miserable with Lord Huxley?”

Edward seemed to think deeply about the question. “There is a brighter side to every situation,” he said eventually. “When I lost your mother, I thought I could never see anything good in the world ever again.” He looked away from her. For a moment, Elizabeth’s heart softened. He had rarely ever talked about her mother’s death.

“But there was something else I had to live for, and that was you. Your mother charged me with looking after you and making

sure you would be cared for when you got older.” He met her gaze, and his voice trembled. “Please believe me, Elizabeth. I am doing the best that I can. I’m sorry that the fate of saving the estate has fallen on you. It was never what I wanted.” He looked down at the table, his folded hands fidgeting. “I do not think it was what your mother would have wanted either.”

Elizabeth wasn’t sure that she had ever seen her father display so much emotion or be so honest with her. Elizabeth put her hand

over his. “I’m sorry, too, Father.” She saw the pity in his eyes and knew that he couldn’t be sure of her happiness, however much he wanted to be.

Tomorrow was coming, looming before her like a terrible monster from a fairy tale. But at least now Elizabeth could take comfort in knowing for sure that her father had done his best.

Chapter 38

After James sat in silence for a few minutes following Victoria's arrest, he went upstairs and informed his family that everything was safe. "Though I must warn you," he added, "there are still constables in the house who want to speak with me. Do not be afraid of them. They are only here to help."

"Real constables?" Oscar asked, excitement in his eyes. "May I speak to them, Father? I want to know how they catch thieves and murderers!"

James chuckled. "I will see if I can arrange a conversation."

As Miss Ludwig took Oscar aside for a lesson, Erin pulled James aside. "Will you tell me what happened?" she asked insistently.

"Yes," he said, glancing over to make sure Oscar was fully entertained. He didn't want him to hear the full tale quite yet. "I'm afraid that the Countess of Chester has been apprehended for murder."

Erin started and lost her balance. James reached out to steady her. “Forgive me, Mother. I suppose I might have said it too abruptly. Are you all right?”

“Yes,” she breathed, putting a hand to her chest. “That is rather dreadful news. She was here, in our home, not all that long ago! And I got on so well with her!”

James sighed. “Well, yes, unfortunately, her looks and manners were rather deceiving.

I know this is quite a shock.”

“But how?” breathed Erin. “How did you know? What did you do?”

“It was Elizabeth.” He shook his head.

“So brilliant, so clever. She figured it all out. The countess tried to poison Elizabeth. That’s why she became ill before the ball. She wrote me a letter just before she left for Deuney Keep. I couldn’t tell anyone about it for fear that the countess would hear of it and elude justice. So, I invited her here and had the

constables search her home for solid evidence. They found some and brought it here, then arrested the countess.”

“What sort of evidence?”

“Poison disguised as a flask of brandy. I’m afraid she killed her late husbands.”

“Oh, how terrible,” Erin said, clearly distressed. “That is so awful!”

“I know.” James frowned. “I confess that

even after the wrong she has done, it gave me no satisfaction to watch her being taken away. She is a sad and depraved creature. However, I am glad that I will never have to see her again.” He dragged a hand over his face. “I must tell Isabelle. She will not take this well.”

“You must tell Elizabeth as well, and thank her,” Erin insisted.

“Yes,” James murmured. He had known that he would write to Elizabeth, so she knew he was safe, but there was something else

tugging at his mind. Somehow it didn't seem as though a letter would be enough. Besides, for the moment, he had other things to deal with. "The constables want to talk with me," he continued, "but they should not be in your way downstairs."

James went back down and found Mr. Lock waiting for him in the drawing room. He stood as James walked in and nodded in greeting.

"I must thank you, my lord, for bringing

such a criminal to our attention. I'd like to tell you exactly what we found if that's all right with you."

"Of course." James took a seat across from Mr. Lock.

"We not only found that flask, which from your description was what she carried around to poison people with, but we found large quantities of poison to refill it. It seems to be cyanide mixed with other substances."

James' mouth fell open. He couldn't even speak for a moment. To think of how much time that he had spent in the presence of this woman, and all the while, she had been carrying around *cyanide*.

“I know it is shocking, sir. It's hard to think that anyone is capable of something so cruel. Cyanide doesn't just kill. It's a painful way to go. It ultimately causes heart failure, which fits the diagnoses of both of the countess's husbands. I'm not sure what went wrong with your friend Lady Gladstone.

Perhaps the countess got a bad batch of cyanide or the lady didn't drink enough—"

James put up a hand. Just the thought of Elizabeth dying so painful a death was making him feel sick. "Thank you, sir, I understand."

"Forgive me, my lord, I got carried away. In addition to the poison, we also found several valuable items that belonged to her late husbands, hidden in her quarters. We did some research and found that most of the items were supposed to be given to other

relatives according to the wills, but at the time the wills were read, the items were not to be found.”

James shook his head. “I can hardly believe it. This is worse than I could have ever imagined.”

“That’s the end of the case, my lord. There’s plenty of evidence against the countess, and there’s no doubt that she’s a murderer.”

James just sat for a moment, taking it all in.

“Is there anything else you need from me, my lord?”

“No, no. You have been a great help, Mr. Lock. I must thank you.”

“The Bow Street Runners are indebted to you for bringing this to our attention.” Mr. Lock smiled sadly. “I know it is difficult to discover that someone you know is so cold-

hearted, but do not let it trouble you any longer. Know that everyone is safe and let that be enough.”

Mr. Lock stood to leave, but James remembered something and shot to his feet. “Just a moment. My son wished to speak with a real constable. He finds your line of work rather fascinating. Could you or one of your colleagues spare the time to have a short conversation with him? Making sure to leave out the most gruesome bits, of course.”

The old man's smile lit up his whole expression. "I'd be more than happy to, my lord."

James thanked him and arranged for Miss Ludwig to bring Oscar down to speak to Mr. Lock. Meanwhile, James knew that he had to write to Isabelle as soon as possible. This would be a huge blow to her.

Just as he sat down to write his letter, his butler came to him. "My lord, there are several people trying to call on you."

James looked up with a frown,
abandoning his letter. “Several people? What
do you mean, Wood?”

Wood fidgeted, looking like he didn’t
want to be the bearer of this news. “There is a
crowd outside, my lord. Lady Kinsley, Lord
and Lady Grant. They seem to be inquiring
after the Countess of Chester.”

James clenched his hand into a fist. How
had word gotten out so quickly? Perhaps

Victoria's screams had attracted attention, and then the gossip had spread from there.

“Tell them to ask the Bow Street Runners if they have any questions. I do not want my involvement to be advertised all over London.”

“Very well, my lord.”

A few minutes passed before Wood announced Isabelle. Her eyes were filled with tears as she rushed towards him. “Is it true,

James, what they are saying? Please tell me it is a mistake!”

James stood and helped Isabelle into a chair. He ordered some brandy to be brought, though the thought of brandy still made him shudder a little, as he sat down beside his friend.

“Isabelle, I am so sorry you had to find out this way. I wanted to be delicate when I told you. Indeed, I was just about to write to you when Wood said you were here.”

Isabelle took in short gasps of air and began fanning herself. “But Victoria, she..., she was my friend.” She began sobbing and hunched over, her body heaving. Tears spilled all over her gown.

“Isabelle,” James breathed, putting a comforting hand on her back. “My dear friend, I’m so sorry this had to happen to you. I wish this had not occurred, if only to save you this grief. You do not deserve it.”

“Is it true,” she said, getting her voice a little under control, “that she killed both of her husbands? That she was a murderer the whole time I knew her?”

James sighed. “I’m afraid so,” he said gently. “You could not have known. None of us could have. She deceived everyone.”

Isabelle cried some more. “It is only now that I think back after what has happened and realize that she never treated Elizabeth well, or you, for that matter. She was not a kind

person, but I was taken in because she acted like she was a friend to me. She never really was, was she?”

“Please do not blame yourself, Isabelle. Victoria is a cunning woman, and you are not the first to be taken in by her claims of friendship.”

“You have been the only true friend to me, James. I have never thanked you enough for what you have done for me.”

“You are a good friend to me, Isabelle.

You helped me out of my darkest time after Braith died, and I will never be able to repay you for that. So, consider our debts to each other equal.”

She smiled up at him through her tears and tried to laugh a little. “Then as your friend, I must tell you something very important. I was too afraid to say it because it was contrary to Victoria’s opinion, but James, you must write to Elizabeth. I know that she cares for you immensely, even after what

happened. Lord Huxley is such a vile man, and I would hate to see her married to him.”

James’s breath quickened. As Isabelle spoke the words, he knew in his heart it was exactly what he had been longing to do. It wasn’t enough for him to tell her about Victoria’s arrest. He had to make things right. “Isn’t she getting married tomorrow?”

“I believe so.”

James sighed. “Then there is no time. A

letter will not get there before tomorrow.” He paced for a few minutes then stopped. “There is only one thing I can do. I will ride to Deuney Keep through the night.”

Isabelle stood. “But James—”

“I must.” He ran a hand through his hair. “If Elizabeth still cares for me as I care for her, we must talk to each other. I must apologize for how I treated her and let her know that Victoria has been brought to justice.”

Isabelle stared at him like she was going to protest again, but then she nodded. “Then send her my greetings as well. Write to me or come see me as soon as you can to let me know what happens.”

“Of course.” James’s mind worked quickly. “There is no time to waste. I must tell my mother what is going on and leave immediately. A carriage will be too slow. I will go on horseback.”

Isabelle shook her head and let out a

short laugh. “You really must be in love,
James.”

James laughed too. “Yes,” he chuckled
breathlessly. “Yes, I think I am.”

Chapter 39

Elizabeth awoke, already feeling an overwhelming sense of dread. She had barely slept the night before, constantly waking from nightmares and the dread that boiled in the pit of her stomach. It was the day she had feared, the day she had hoped would never come. Her wedding day.

There was a knock at her door. Edward Gladstone entered with a smile. “Ah, good morning, Elizabeth. I wanted to make sure you were awake. Today is your big day!”

“Yes,” Elizabeth sighed. “I know.”

Edward nodded and looked like he was about to leave, but he paused. “Your mother would be proud of you for doing the right thing, Elizabeth. You are so strong.”

“Thank you, Father.” Elizabeth couldn’t manage to say any more than that. It was all over. Today was the first day of the rest of her miserable life.

“I will see you soon. Please do not be late coming downstairs.” Once again, he paused, but then walked out of the door.

Elizabeth sighed. Her maid came in and asked if she wanted to start getting ready. Elizabeth waited a minute or two before replying.

“I suppose so.” Elizabeth got up and dutifully sat in front of her mirror. Her maid immediately began to arrange her hair. She had asked Elizabeth how she wanted it a few

days ago, and Elizabeth had said she didn't care. The maid had tried to press her, but Elizabeth had replied the same every time. She didn't care how she looked.

As much as she tried not to, she thought of Lord Huxley. She saw that look of greed on his face and knew it would be the same look he'd give her when she walked down the aisle. She shuddered.

“Are you all right, my lady?”

“I’m well.” Elizabeth looked at herself in the mirror. She looked pale and gaunt with bags under her eyes, a result of her miserable condition for the past two weeks.

She had hoped to have heard from James by now. He should have sent a reply, if only to say that he didn’t believe her. He could have written to her to tell her that he wished her well, despite what had happened, but there had been nothing. She had asked about letters every day just to be sure, but there was nothing for her. It seemed James had already

forgotten about her.

Once the maid finished her hair, Elizabeth looked at her work. “You have done an excellent job,” Elizabeth said sincerely. It looked beautiful, her long golden locks arranged in braids around her head. She only wished that James could appreciate it rather than Huxley.

It was time to step into the wedding gown. Elizabeth almost cried as her maid helped her with the white dress, but she held

back her tears. Such a beautiful gown to be wasted on such a terrible day.

Elizabeth couldn't bear to look at herself dressed as a bride. She didn't feel like a bride at all. She felt more like livestock that had been groomed to be sold off.

She felt weak, and a spell of dizziness came over her. She reached out for the wall and held herself up, trying to breathe evenly.

“Are you well, my lady?” the maid asked

worriedly.

“I am fine. I only need a little water.”

“Very well.” The maid rushed out of the room to collect it for her.

A few tears slipped down Elizabeth’s cheeks, and she held a hand over her mouth to quiet a sob. How could this be happening?

Chapter 40

James rode hard, as he never ridden before. Even as his horse's hooves thundered across the terrain, he felt that his steed wasn't fast enough. What if he came all this way only to reach Elizabeth too late?

The thought stirred him fully awake. He had almost slipped off the saddle a few times, but now that he was this close to Deuney Keep, he was determined to make it there in one piece.

After what seemed like days, he finally saw the familiar estate appear in front of him. He grinned despite himself. The morning sun was only just rising over the horizon. He desperately hoped he had made it in time.

James jumped off his horse and knocked at the door. The butler opened it and tried to disguise his shock with a well-placed cough, but James could read his surprised expression easily.

“Good morning, my lord. Please come

in.”

James thanked him and followed him into the foyer.

“I’m afraid that Lord Gladstone is occupied at the moment,” the butler continued.

“I’m here to see Elizabeth,” James said, still a little breathless from the long ride. “I must speak to her immediately.”

The butler shifted his stance uncomfortably. “My apologies, my lord, but Lady Elizabeth is not available for callers at the moment.”

“Then she’s here!” James felt hope spring up inside him. Without waiting a second longer, he hurried toward the stairs leading to the second floor of the house.

“My lord!” the butler called behind him, but James was long gone. His heart pounded in his chest. He reached the second floor, but

he wasn't sure where Elizabeth's room was.

Then he heard someone crying softly and followed the sound to an open door. He poked his head inside and saw Elizabeth leaning against the wall, her hands covering her face as she cried.

James walked in. It felt like he hadn't seen her in months. "Elizabeth," he said softly.

She looked up at him with a gasp. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and her skin was pale, almost matching the color of the white

wedding gown she wore. She stared at him for a moment as if not comprehending.

“James?” she whispered.

“Elizabeth, I...” The whole way here he had been thinking about what to say, but now that he was actually in her presence, he found that he couldn’t think of the right words. “You cannot marry Lord Huxley,” he stated.

She uttered something of a laugh mingled with a sob and asked, “Why not?”

“Because...” On an impulse he stepped forward, took her chin in his hand, and kissed her gently. “Because I love you, Elizabeth, and I am asking you to marry me instead.”

Tears filled Elizabeth’s eyes. She covered her mouth, as she laughed. “James.” She touched a hand to his cheek. James grinned and placed his hand over hers.

“We must ask my father first,” Elizabeth said. “I will go and find him. Wait for us in the

study.”

James swallowed, overcome with emotion. “Very well.” He allowed her hand to slip from his, though he didn’t want to let her out of his sight for fear that she would be lost to him again. He did as she asked and found the study. He stood just inside and waited, frantically wondering if her father would agree.

After a few minutes, he heard footsteps. Elizabeth and Edward entered, the latter

looking exasperated as he greeted James.

“It is a pleasure to see you again, my lord. Elizabeth tells me there is something urgent you wish to speak to me about?”

Despite James’ thoughts, he thought he saw a spark of hope in Edward’s eyes. Could it be that even he didn’t want Elizabeth to marry Huxley?

James bowed his head. “Forgive me for the hasty manner in which I have arrived.” He

was all too aware that he looked a mess after riding all night. “The matter is extremely urgent. I wish to marry Elizabeth if she will have me.” He glanced over at her and let her smile fill him with hope.

“I made a mistake before,” he continued, meeting Edward’s eyes again. “I took Elizabeth for granted, and I will never do so again. I will provide for her and for your estate, and she will make me the happiest of men.”

Edward looked relieved. He turned to

Elizabeth. “What do you say to this?”

“I want to marry him, Father.” She smiled at James through her tears.

James’ heart soared. He looked at Edward, waiting for his judgment. He seemed to think for a moment, and then sighed. “I have vowed to do what I think is best for Elizabeth. Now that you have come back into her life, I believe you are what is best. I would be honored to have you as part of my family.”

James breathed out a long sigh. “Thank you, sir. I promise that I will take care of her.”

Edward smiled. He looked so very tired. “I am sure that you will. Now, I must go and cancel some arrangements.” He walked off and began giving instructions to the butler.

James met Elizabeth’s eyes. They both laughed, and James grasped her hands.

“Elizabeth,” he sighed, “I must tell you how sorry I am for betraying your trust.”

Elizabeth laughed and shook her head,
though tears still tracked down her cheeks.
“James...” She seemed to be lost for words.

Remembering something very important
that he had told himself he would do, he
reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a
worn, folded-up letter. “Please read this
whenever you wish. I fear that my words are
not sufficient to convey the depths of my
sorrow for how I treated you, but this letter
may do it some justice.”

Elizabeth took it carefully from his hands. “You do not need to apologize anymore, James. I forgive you. In fact, it is I who must ask for your forgiveness. I had no right to push you away like I did. If I had only talked to you, we could have resolved our differences.”

“Do not blame yourself.” James pressed her hand. “I acted appallingly, and you had every right to refuse me. I need you to know that I trust you, Elizabeth, more than I trust

anyone. You are an amazing woman, and I
will say it every day for the rest of my life.”

Chapter 41

Elizabeth took a deep breath, as she sat down in the parlor. While a light luncheon was prepared, James was talking to Edward to see how he might help in canceling the wedding. Elizabeth took the moment of solitude to open the letter that James had given her, which was unsealed and creased.

She had difficulty reading the sloppy penmanship. It was clear that James had been in earnest while writing. It was dated the day that their separation had taken place.

Dearest Elizabeth,

How can I begin to express how much I regret my actions? No words are strong enough to convey the depths of my guilt. I am such a fool for ever doubting you. When you needed me the most, I turned my back on our friendship and everything we have been through together. I have acted despicably. Even though it may be too late, I must tell you.

I love you, Elizabeth. I love you so deeply

that I hardly even know how to put it into words.

You are the most incredible woman I have ever met, and I cannot bear the thought of losing you. I have loved you ever since that night at the ball when we danced, and you were brave enough to accept my proposal, even though you hardly knew me. Since then, every moment spent with you has only made me love you more.

I will beg your forgiveness for however long it takes. If you ever find it within yourself to pardon me, I will spend the rest of my life telling you how much I love and adore you.

I love you, Elizabeth.

The letter wasn't signed. Elizabeth read it through again and was so moved at the openness of his words that she cried. When James walked into the room, he met her eyes and immediately looked horrified. He rushed to her side and took her hands in his.

“Elizabeth, what's wrong?”

Elizabeth uttered a breathy laugh and

held out the letter. “I have just read your letter. I hardly know how to reply, except to say that I love you too, James.”

James smiled. “I truly mean it, Elizabeth. I will tell you that I love you every day for the rest of our lives.” He delicately kissed the back of her hand.

“I am sorry for being so stubborn.” Especially after reading James’ letter, Elizabeth couldn’t help but continue to feel guilty for how she had acted. “I never wanted

to cause you so much pain.”

“Please put it behind you. When I wrote that letter, I was more ashamed of myself than injured by you. Now, I am the happiest man on earth.” His eyes shone with so much adoration that Elizabeth didn’t doubt his words.

Soon, luncheon was served, and James and Elizabeth moved to the dining room.

“Where is Father?” Elizabeth asked.

“He has many things to attend to today, but he said that he will join us when he is able,” James replied as they sat down.

For the first time in a long while, Elizabeth looked at the food served and found she was starving. However, she forced herself to eat at a steady pace.

“I confess,” she said with a small smile, “that it has been a long time since I have eaten properly.”

James didn't seem to find any humor in the matter. He frowned and his eyes showed concern. "I hate to think of everything you have gone through. I wish that I had tried to speak to you sooner."

"Do not think about it any longer. We are together now, and everything is as it should be." Elizabeth gasped suddenly, as she remembered something. "The countess!" she blurted out. "Did you get my letter? What happened?"

James placed his hand on top of hers. “It is all over. The Countess of Chester was apprehended yesterday by the Bow Street Runners.”

Elizabeth sighed and sat back in her chair. “You believed me, then?”

“Of course, I believed you. I wanted to take action immediately, but it took me a few days to come up with a plan. I informed the constables, and they found sufficient evidence

against her. It is because of you that she was brought to justice.”

Elizabeth was glad that Victoria could no longer hurt anyone, but she found herself frowning anyway. “I do feel sorry for her.”

“I do too. It was not easy to see her being taken away. But the most important thing is that we are safe.”

“This is outrageous!”

Elizabeth jumped as the loud voice rang through the house. She met James' eyes. She knew that voice.

“I have never been treated like this. You cannot treat me like this!” the voice thundered, ever closer.

Elizabeth shot to her feet, fearing the storm that was coming. Lord Huxley barged in, his face red and deeply wrinkled with anger. Edward followed close behind.

“William, please listen to me,” Edward said.

“You are not being sensible.” Huxley eyed Elizabeth first, then James before he turned back to Edward. “She is mine. You cannot break off our betrothal.”

James took a confrontational step towards him. “Excuse me, sir.”

Edward held up a hand and moved into Lord Huxley’s path. He stood resolute and

determined, as Elizabeth had never seen him before.

“Elizabeth has chosen whom she loves,” Edward said, “and it is not you. I must ask you to leave immediately, and never show your face here again.”

Huxley looked as shocked as Elizabeth felt. She had never seen her father take such a stand before, and she found it very touching that he would do so on her behalf. She had already cried so much today, and yet she felt

tears in her eyes once more. If she had ever doubted, now she knew just how much her father cared about her.

Lord Huxley looked like he was going to continue his tirade, but finally he simply stormed off without another word. Edward sighed. Elizabeth ran forward and hugged him tightly.

“Thank you, Father,” she whispered.

“I could not bear seeing you so unhappy,

Elizabeth.” He pulled away from her with a smile. “I even considered calling off the wedding myself, because of the way you were acting. I can see why now. James is the one who makes you truly happy.”

“Yes.” Elizabeth glanced back at him.

“Yes, he does.” She embraced her father once again. She could hardly believe that such a terrible day had turned into the best day of her life.

Epilogue

James could hardly believe, it as he walked down the aisle with Elizabeth, now his wife. Yellow flowers were everywhere, adding beauty to the scene, and complimenting Elizabeth's bright hair. James smiled over at her and thought that she was too radiant for words. He knew that he would never forget this day. He was happier than he had ever been.

“Does this mean you are my mother now?” Oscar asked Elizabeth, as they left the

church.

Elizabeth laughed in reply. It seemed that the day was filled with laughter and smiles. Everyone wished them well—Felicia, the Earl of Presport, Isabelle, Erin, and Edward, and many others besides. Elizabeth seemed especially pleased to see Felicia again, and James smiled, as the two shared their excitement over Felicia's engagement to the Earl of Presport.

The wedding was the talk of London for

weeks. Elizabeth rolled her eyes and talked about people's fickleness, how they had only been too happy to deride her character just weeks before. Isabelle, for one, was overjoyed. She couldn't stop talking about how it was the most beautiful wedding she had ever attended. In the end, she even admitted that the yellow flowers had been a splendid touch.

A few weeks after the wedding, James and Elizabeth traveled to Paris to spend some time alone. Elizabeth was delighted as they toured the city, and she loved it just as much

as James had thought she would.

One morning at breakfast, they sat on a balcony overlooking the Seine. The sun had just risen, and James was content with the companionable silence, as he drank in the warm air and the smells of the bakery just below them.

“I do not think I could ever grow tired of Paris,” Elizabeth said, eventually.

“Nor I,” agreed James. “Especially when

you are with me.”

Elizabeth smiled at him.

“Did you ever think you would be able to come here?” James continued.

“No,” Elizabeth said, shaking her head.

“It was a dream I thought would never come to pass. But as several of my dreams have come true recently,” she said, taking James’ hand, “perhaps I should start dreaming more.”

James chuckled. "I find myself believing in impossible things too." He looked out over the water and knew that a few months ago, he would have never believed he could be this happy. "Our lives will never be the same from now on."

Elizabeth gazed deeply into his eyes. She placed a hand on her stomach. "Yes. Our lives are changed forever."

James read the look in her eyes and gasped. He jumped out of his chair so quickly

that it nearly toppled over and knelt by Elizabeth's side. He reverently placed his hand over hers, hardly able to imagine that they would soon have a child. "Elizabeth," he whispered in awe.

Elizabeth took his head in her hands. Her eyes shining with tears, she smiled. "I love you, James."

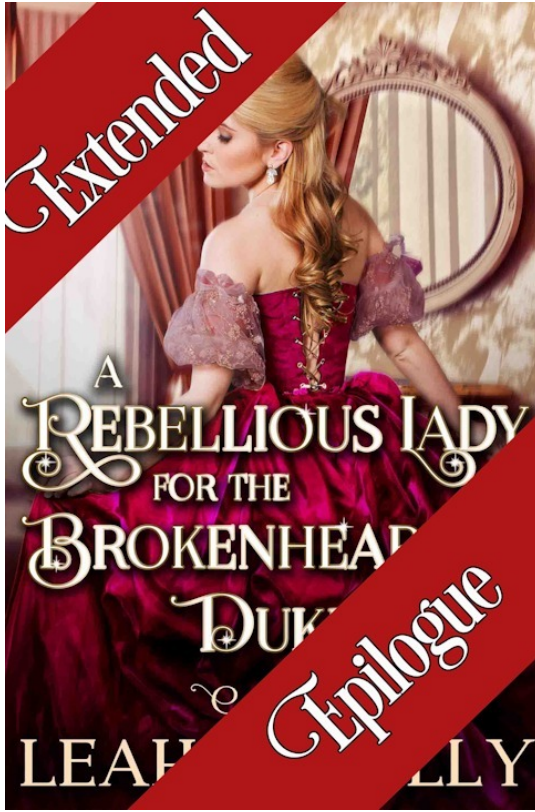
"I love you, Elizabeth." He kissed her tenderly. "And I cannot wait for this new adventure."

The Extended Epilogue

I want to thank you with all my heart for reading my novel **“A Rebellious Lady for the Brokenhearted Duke”!**

Would you like a sneak peek in Elizabeth and James’ future?

Click on the image or the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a **BONUS**, I will send you the Extended Epilogue of this Book!



<https://BookHip.com/PMGAZT>

Pretty Little Lies for the Duke's Heart

Chapter 1

Charlotte closed her eyes, allowing the light spray of ocean water to mix with the salt of her tears. She had not spoken a word to her maid on the carriage ride to the docks, despite the young woman's attempts to engage her in enthusiastic conversation.

The maid chattered away, Charlotte presumed, in an attempt to lighten her mood. She did not fault the young woman for being so joyous, or for wishing to spread her jubilation to her mistress, but no amount of

effort could eradicate the cloud of doom that Charlotte felt hovering over her. She focused on her tears instead of the maid's words and resisted the desire to ask for silence.

Charlotte understood her companion's fascination. She knew that her maid was excited about the trip and was looking forward to seeing France. Truthfully, if the circumstances were different, Charlotte might have shared the girl's excitement. As things were, she was unable to do so.

She thought back to the dreams that had haunted her for weeks. After each one, she had soothed herself with promises that she would find a way out of her forbidding future. She told herself that she would be able to persuade her parents to see reason, to see how much she wanted, needed, to choose her own path in life. With her parents' goodbye kisses, it had become painfully clear that her pleas and hopes had gone unheard.

She dreaded the upcoming chapter of her life with every fiber of her being, even though

it should be a happy, exciting time. What woman would not be blissfully happy to marry a French count? Charlotte knew the answer, of course. It did not change the fact that she would not be blissfully happy; she would be downright miserable.

Comte Francois was, by all appearances, a respectable man. He was quite successful in his business endeavors, had great wealth, and managed his title as Comte with elegance and renown. However, at the edges of France's high society and within the London ton,

rumors perpetually surfaced regarding the Comte. Charlotte had heard that he sometimes cheated business partners, making them believe that the percentages of revenue that came in were less than they actually were, or that they had agreed to give him a greater share of the profits.

Someone, though she could no longer recall who it was, had once told her that the great Comte regularly did business with criminals. They had said that if a person or company posed any competition, he would

send ne'er-do-wells to frighten the potential competitor and remove them from his path. She had confronted her father about this speculation but had received only the vaguest and most noncommittal of answers.

Worst of all, however, was the rumor that the Comte was fond of taking lovers in secret, going so far as to seek the company of ladies of the night. Charlotte shuddered at the thought of taking such a man for a husband. Yet here she was, waiting at the docks not far from her London home for the ship that would

take her to him, in accordance with the agreement her parents had made just after her sixteenth birthday, agreeing to give him her hand in marriage. Her heart was growing heavier and fuller of dread with every passing moment.

The recollections of the rumors involving the Comte were too much for Charlotte to bear. She covered her mouth with her hand, tears trickling down her fingers as she fled the ship's docking point.

“My lady,” Ruth called, temporarily stunned by her mistress’s outburst. “Wait!”

Charlotte paid her no heed as she weaved her way through the people clustered along the pier, awaiting the ship’s arrival with notably more enthusiasm than she. She looked around, lost, and overcome with anxiety, seeking any place that she might take refuge until she could compose herself. A hand on her elbow made Charlotte start with a gasp.

“My lady,” her maid repeated, pulling

her gently away from a group of people who were starting to become too interested in Charlotte's distress. "Why do you fret?"

Charlotte embraced her maid, grateful for her companionship, as well as her friendship. She tried to steady her breaths, but they were coming fast and shallow. Her entire body was trembling, and she could not order her thoughts enough to answer. Instead, she sobbed against the maid's shoulder and managed nothing more than a weak shake of her head.

Ruth patted her back for a moment, murmuring to her soothingly. Then she released Charlotte gently and guided her to an empty shipping crate. Once Charlotte was seated, Ruth handed her a handkerchief. She dried her eyes quickly, as Ruth positioned herself so that she shielded Charlotte from prying eyes.

“Oh, Ruth,” Charlotte whispered, still struggling to calm herself. “I cannot go through with this.”

Ruth put a hand on Charlotte's shoulder.

“Forgive me, my lady,” Ruth said. “But perhaps it will not be so terrible. After all, France is a beautiful place.”

Charlotte rose quickly from the crate and began to pace.

“It could be the most beautiful place in the world and still feel like a cage, if I am married to a scoundrel whom I do not love,”

she said, tears filling her eyes once more.

Ruth smiled sympathetically at Charlotte.

“What if the rumors you have heard about the Comte are all untrue?” she asked.

Charlotte sighed with exasperation, pacing faster and further.

“What if they are not?” she countered.

Ruth looked at Charlotte, her hands

clasped in front of her.

“Perhaps if you talk about some of this with me, it will seem less awful,” she said, her brow furrowing at Charlotte’s increasingly agitated state.

Charlotte opened her mouth to respond to her maid, but a muffled whimper made her fall silent. She froze mid-pace and looked at Ruth.

“Did you hear that?” Charlotte asked.

Ruth nodded slowly, eyes wide.

Charlotte began walking again, slowly
and quietly.

“Hello?” she called. “Is someone there?”

Ruth stepped toward Charlotte.

“It was probably a small animal, or
perhaps a child,” she said.

Charlotte held up her hand, listening carefully. After several moments of silence, she turned to agree with her maid, but then the sound came again, somewhat louder than before. She spotted a stack of shipping crates not far from where she had been sitting, concealed in the shade of a large pillar.

Ruth and Charlotte exchanged looks. Was someone injured and too weak to call for help? Had they happened upon some sort of crime? Charlotte debated with herself for a moment, unsure of whether she should

investigate. If someone were being attacked, the aggressor might turn on her, but she could not just turn her back on someone in need. At last she took a deep breath and straightened.

She approached the crates, with Ruth following closely. Behind the boxes, Charlotte spotted a young woman crouching, her hand over her mouth, her gray eyes wide and full of tears. Her blond hair fell in loose ringlets around her face, and Charlotte noticed a striking resemblance to herself. She held out her hand to the woman, who recoiled,

seemingly frightened. Charlotte smiled warmly at her.

“Do not be afraid,” she said. “We want to help you. Come with us and tell us what is troubling you.”

The woman studied Charlotte and Ruth for a moment with the same wide, fearful eyes. Then, slowly, she rose, taking Charlotte’s hand but not meeting her gaze.

“Please,” the woman whispered in a

trembling voice. “I do not want any trouble. I was merely hoping to find a scrap of discarded food, or a fallen coin or two.”

Charlotte studied the young woman for several moments, surprised. Was the woman a beggar? Her clothes, although dirty and not as new or elaborate as her own, were not worn or tattered. But why else would she be seeking food scraps and money?

The woman trembled before them, as though fearing that they might alert the other

people on the docks to her presence. Charlotte slowly raised her hands and gave the woman a reassuring smile. The gestures seemed to do little to comfort the woman, and she cowered further away. Charlotte took a step back, trying to decide what to do.

She exchanged a look with Ruth, who was gazing at the woman with deep sympathy. Charlotte slowly led the woman from behind the crates towards the one she had been sitting on a few moments before. The woman complied, her head low.

“Do not worry,” Charlotte said, patting the woman’s arm. “We will not say anything about finding you here, but, please, tell us why you are here?”

Charlotte expected her to remain silent, or even to flee without another word. Instead, however, the woman took a deep breath and at last looked Charlotte in the eye.

“My father has disowned me,” she said bluntly. “He is a baron, and he was trying to

force me to find a proper husband. I was already in love with a man my father considered to be worse than a peasant, and I could not comply with his wishes.” She laughed dryly as her eyes filled with tears. “I had no way of knowing that the man I loved only wanted me for my father’s fortune, or that he would vanish the moment my family disowned me.”

Charlotte stilled. She could relate to the woman’s plight, and she wondered if she might have found herself in the same position

with her own father, had she not reluctantly agreed to travel to France and marry the Comte. It seemed that the woman's feelings mirrored Charlotte's every bit as much as her appearance did.

Suddenly, Charlotte gasped, an idea taking root in her mind before she was fully aware it was happening. She took the woman's hands gently and gave her an enthusiastic look.

“What if I could do more for you than

merely find you a bit of food or a couple of coins?” she asked.

The woman blinked at her, confused.

“I do not understand,” she said.

Charlotte knelt beside her.

“What if I could set you up with a new name, a home, a husband, and as much food as you could eat?”

The woman pulled her hands away from Charlotte, eyeing her suspiciously.

“Are you thinking of selling me to someone?” she asked.

Charlotte laughed.

“Not at all,” she said. “What I mean is, you could take my place aboard the approaching ship, travel to France, and live the life of your dreams.”

The woman continued to look at
Charlotte with doubt and distrust.

“If it is a dream life,” she said slowly,
“then why are you so willing to hand it to
me?”

Charlotte sighed.

“Because it is not the life of *my* dreams,”
she said quietly.

Understanding dawned on the woman’s

face. She stared at Charlotte, her brow furrowed, as she mulled over the words. At last, she rose from the crate.

“Very well,” she said. “Tell me more about this dream life.”

Charlotte smiled, relieved that the woman did not think her completely mad and proceeded to explain about traveling to France to marry the Comte. The woman listened with cautious optimism, taking in Charlotte’s words.

At last, Charlotte finished filling in the woman, who appeared to be carefully considering Charlotte's crazy proposal.

“My lady,” Ruth whispered, gripping her elbow. “I do not believe that this is a good idea.”

Charlotte excused herself and led her maid out of the woman's earshot, as she continued contemplating what Charlotte was offering.

“It is the perfect idea,” Charlotte said, unable to contain her excitement. “The Comte only knows that I have yellow hair, gray eyes, and that I am slim. This woman matches my appearance identically in those aspects. She even has a similar face shape and bone structure. The Comte will never know the difference. I will be free of him and the life I dread in France, and I will have helped a poor woman who might otherwise die in the streets.”

Ruth shook her head.

“What of your father?” she asked. “Do you think he will be so easily fooled by some imposter pretending to be his daughter?”

Charlotte put her hands on her maid’s shoulders.

“How will Father know?” she asked.

“Once he marries me off, I expect that he will not feel the need to visit for quite some time.

Even if he does eventually make the trip to

France, by that time it will not matter. What is done will be done, and there will be nothing anyone can do to change it.”

Ruth frowned.

“That is precisely what worries me, my lady,” she said softly.

The woman cleared her throat, approaching Charlotte and Ruth.

“Please,” Charlotte whispered. “Trust

me.”

Ruth looked at Charlotte silently.

“I will do it,” the woman said bluntly.

Charlotte’s eyes widened.

“You will?” she asked.

The woman nodded.

“I highly doubt that I can board that ship

looking like this,” she said, gesturing to her dirty, drab dress. “And if we are to switch identities, we should probably learn more about each other, and quickly, before the ship arrives.”

Charlotte smiled. The woman even reminded her of herself when she spoke.

“Of course,” she agreed. “My name is Charlotte Hackney, and I am twenty years old. I am the daughter of the Earl of Devon, and bride-to-be of Comte Francois. This is my

maid, and dear friend, Ruth Bevel.”

The woman nodded, seeming to grow more excited about their plan by the moment.

“It is a pleasure to meet you both,” she said with a curtsy. “And I am Christine Becker, daughter of the Baron of Weston. I am eighteen years old, and ...,” she paused and chuckled bitterly. “Well, you know the rest of my woeful tale.”

Charlotte’s heart broke for Christine. She

was so timid and sensitive, and she certainly deserved better than that which life had given her thus far. She gave Christine a warm smile and returned the curtsy. Then she looked Christine over.

“We should get you out of those clothes and into mine,” Charlotte said.

The woman flushed and glanced around.

“How on earth will we switch clothes here, in front of all these people?” she

whispered, incredulous.

As if on cue, the crown milling on the docks began making its way to the boarding point. Charlotte looked up and saw the ship, which had nearly reached its destination. She gasped, realizing that they only had a few more minutes if their ruse was to be successful.

“Quickly,” she said, lowering her voice.

“Let us move back behind the crates where you were hiding. We will exchange clothes

there.”

Christine’s eyes widened, but she did not question Charlotte. The three women moved back to the shadow-shrouded crates, and Ruth positioned herself directly in front of them to block them from the sight of passers-by.

As quickly as possible, Charlotte and Christine exchanged clothes. Once the women were adequately covered, Ruth abandoned her guard post and helped them finish dressing. When she was done, she stepped back and

looked them over. Her eyes widened, and she put her hand to her mouth. Charlotte looked at Christine and gave a tiny gasp.

Christine had transformed into a beautiful, proper lady before her eyes, and the resemblance between the women was now uncanny. From the expression on Christine's face as she studied Charlotte, it was clear that she saw the resemblance as well.

Charlotte recovered quickly when she saw people beginning to board the ship. She

knew that the Comte's brother would disembark soon to find her and escort her to France.

“Come,” she said, gesturing to Ruth and Christine. “Let us get you ready to present to Comte Francois's brother.”

Christine followed Charlotte, but Ruth stayed where she was.

“My lady,” she said. “I am staying here with you.”

Charlotte walked back to Ruth and took her hands.

“No,” she said. “Christine must have a maid. She could not possibly travel without a chaperone. Besides, this will give you the opportunity to see France, just as you wanted.”

Ruth glanced at Christine and shook her head firmly.

“I am not unsympathetic to Miss Becker’s plight,” she said. “But I will not leave you. I cannot. Please, do not ask me to do so.”

Before the discussion could continue, Charlotte saw a man approaching them. She held her breath and gestured almost imperceptibly to him, giving Ruth and Christine a meaningful look. Despite Ruth’s protests seconds before, she put a hand on Christine’s arm and approached the man with a warm, professional smile.

“Good day, ladies,” the man said, bowing as he looked at Christine. “Lady Charlotte, I presume?”

Charlotte stayed rooted to the spot, holding her breath. She suddenly feared they would be discovered, and the whole plan would fall apart.

Christine gave the man a surprisingly elegant curtsy and smiled brilliantly at him.

“Yes, my lord,” she said.

The gentleman smiled warmly.

“Very good, my lady,” he said. “I take it this is your lady’s maid?”

Ruth gave a brief curtsy.

“Yes, my lord,” she said. “However, I will be unable to travel with Lady Charlotte. I am not well, I am afraid, so I must stay behind.”

The gentleman studied her briefly before

nodding.

“Very well,” he said. “There are other members of Comte Francois’s household aboard the ship. They should prove sufficient chaperones in your absence. I wish you a speedy recovery.”

Ruth curtseyed again, and, even from where she stood, Charlotte could see the relief on her maid’s face.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said. She

turned to Christine. “My lady, I wish you a safe, happy journey.”

Christine embraced Ruth gently, and Charlotte was surprised at how genuine it seemed.

“Thank you, Ruth,” she said, looking at Charlotte over the maid’s shoulder. “For everything.”

Charlotte gave her a small smile and nod, grateful that the gentleman had not noticed

her. She and Ruth stood as still as statues, as Christine took the gentleman's arm and disappeared into the crowd. Only once she could no longer see the curly blond hair did Charlotte dare to breathe a sigh of relief and join Ruth where she stood.

“We should leave here at once,”

Charlotte whispered to her.

Ruth nodded.

“Where will we go?” she asked.

Charlotte stopped. She had acted so spontaneously that she did not have a plan for what came next. She pulled out her coin purse, which she had tucked into the pocket of Christine's dress after she had donned it and counted the money inside.

“We have enough shillings to last the month, and almost enough to board a ship to the New World,” she said.

Ruth nodded, not questioning her

mistress's choice to travel to the New World.

“Perhaps we could slip aboard a ship in some crates,” Ruth suggested.

Charlotte smiled.

“Ruth, darling, you are a genius,” she said, embracing her maid.

Trying to stay out of sight, the two women slipped unnoticed along the docks, searching for any crates near a ship that was

leaving for the New World.

Luck favored them once more, and they found crates that were being loaded onto a ship further down the dock. After determining that none of the ship's crew was nearby, they slipped into a crate with a top left askew.

Fortunately, it was largely empty, save for some straw and rough clothing. The women settled inside and pulled the crate lid closed.

Soon enough, the crate began to rise off the ground. Charlotte's heart was pounding in her ears, and she put a hand over her mouth to

muffle her surprised grunt when she heard voices just outside their crate. Then she watched in horror the lid of their crate toppled off and fell to the ground. The sound attracted the attention of one of the men talking beside the crate. He stared at them in shock, but only for a moment.

“Halt,” he said, holding up his hand to the crew members who were attempting to load the cargo. He reached for the crate and helped lower it to the ground. Once it was secure, he pulled Ruth and Charlotte up by

their elbows.

“Well, well,” he said, smirking. “What have we here?”

Chapter 2

Duncan Lancaster looked over the invoice yet again. He had tallied up the total number of crates and wine bottles he was supposed to have, but he was still one short. It was certainly not the biggest mistake that had ever occurred with one of his shipments, but it was perplexing, nonetheless. He supposed that he could simply order an extra crate of wine with his next shipment, but he would have to refigure his books in the meantime.

“Are you certain that there is no other

place the wine could be?” he asked the ship’s purser.

The man shook his head, looking sheepish.

“No, milord,” he said. “We have searched everywhere. I believe there was a clerical error, and we are simply short one crate of wine. I am terribly sorry, Lord Willeton.”

Duncan glanced at the invoice again, then looked back at the man. He put a hand

on the man's shoulder.

“It is alright, Jack,” he said, smiling warmly. “These things happen. It is not your fault.”

Jack smiled back at him gratefully.

“Thank you, milord,” he said. “I will ensure that this does not happen next time.”

Duncan nodded and smiled again.

“I know that you will,” he said.

He folded the invoice up and tucked it into his pocket, so that he could make the proper adjustments to his books when he returned home. Then he began to help the ship’s crew load the remaining crates of wine. He made a mental note to write a letter to the customer, informing the man of the shortage and promising to send extra wine, free of charge, in his next order. The customer was one with whom he had worked for years, and he felt sure this arrangement would be more

than satisfactory.

Moments later, he heard a commotion.

He looked up from the crate he was handling and saw two of the ship's crew members pointing and shouting about a crate swinging a few feet off the ground. Duncan frowned, not understanding the source of the excitement. He abandoned his own crate and approached the men.

“What has happened?” he asked.

The men stared at him with matching expressions of shock. Duncan moved closer, noticing that the crate's lid was lying on the ground. He looked up, and his own mouth fell open. Inside it were two terrified young women.

Duncan jumped into action.

“Lower that crate at once,” he shouted to the stunned shipmates. His authoritative tone snapped them out of their trance, and they scattered. Within moments, the crate had been

gently lowered back down to the dock.

Duncan, seeing the women were now safe from grievous harm, took a moment to collect himself before he approached the crate.

“Well, well,” he said, bemusement replacing his earlier surprise and concern.

“What have we here?”

The two women exchanged a fleeting look of terror before attempting to flee from the crate. The hems of their dresses got caught on the rim of the box, and Duncan was easily

able to snag their arms gently as they tried to pull free.

“Correct me if I am wrong,” he said slowly, “but the two of you do not look like any bottles of port wine I have ever seen.”

The women looked at the ground, not meeting his gaze.

“This is quite the predicament, you see,” he continued. “For I found you in place of a missing crate of wine. It does make me

wonder if, perhaps, the rest of my wine was not misplaced, after all, but rather stolen.”

At this, the blond woman’s head snapped up, and she met his gaze directly.

“Such a crime would make us rather foolish. Why would we climb into the very crate from which we stole and try to sneak aboard the same ship onto which it was being loaded?” She patted the pockets of her unremarkable, somewhat dirty dress. “And besides, where on earth would we have

managed to hide so much wine?”

Duncan chewed his lip to stifle a laugh.

He knew very well that these women could not have stolen or hidden all that wine between the time the shipment arrived and the time he found them inside the crate. He did, however, wonder why they would risk stowing away amongst a ship's cargo.

“Well, it was rather foolish to try to illegally board a ship without paying for your journey,” he said. “Either foolish or desperate.

I am merely trying to discern which.”

The women exchanged a look, and the fair-haired one fell silent once more. Duncan noticed how beautiful she was, and he could not help wondering why on earth she would take such a risk.

“We really are terribly sorry,” she said, “but you must believe that we are not thieves.”

Duncan swallowed another chuckle.

“Stealing away on a ship without paying is theft, young miss,” he said.

The woman blushed again, and Duncan felt remorseful when he saw the look of shame that came over her face.

“We are truly sorry,” she repeated, her voice dropping almost to a whisper.

Duncan thought for a moment. He did not wish to see them arrested, but he did need

to know why they were trying to stow away on his ship. Whoever and whatever they were, they were clearly not dangerous, and, if they were in some kind of trouble, he wanted to help them if he could

To his surprise, the darker-haired woman looked right at him.

“Is there anything we can do to correct this situation?” she asked. Her voice was timid but steady. “We truly meant no harm. We just had no other choice.”

Duncan looked at her, appreciating the direct way the women spoke, despite how scared and uncomfortable they were.

“Well, that depends,” he said.

The women looked at each other once more, and then back at him.

“On what does it depend?” the brown-haired woman asked.

“On how honest you are with me about what you were doing in the crate,” he said.

“And why exactly you had no other choice but to stowaway on my ship.”

The women looked at each other with identical expressions of fear and worry.

Chapter 3

Charlotte stared at the man before her, terrified. Her mind fumbled for any feasible reason as to why they were hiding in a cargo crate, but she came up with nothing. She dared to glance at Ruth, whose face was red and streaked with tears. She prayed that her maid would not suffer, as her only crime had been being unwaveringly faithful to her mistress.

“Please,” she said. “Punish me if you must but release my friend. This was all my

idea. She wanted nothing to do with it.”

The man folded his arms across his chest and studied the women.

“Even if that were true, I caught you both trying to smuggle aboard my ship. Not just you. I do not decide who evades justice, and who deserves it.”

He began pacing in front of the women, and, for a brief moment, Charlotte considered another attempt to flee. She felt sure that they

would fail again, however, and any punishment they received would likely be far worse if they continued trying to run. “I believe that the constable would be of great help to me in this situation. If you don’t start being honest with me, I am afraid that I will have no choice but to call him and explain what has transpired here.”

Charlotte bit her lip. She knew she must tell this man something, but she was still at a loss for an explanation. She could not tell him who she truly was. Even though Christine was

already on her way to France, if word reached her father that Charlotte was still in London, and that she had not kept her word to marry the Comte, her father would see to it that both she and Christine were in as much trouble as the law would allow. On the other hand, if she did not tell this man something approaching the truth, he might do the same.

She took a deep, shaky breath, and met the gentleman's gaze once more.

“My name is Christine Becker,” she

began. As she spoke, she also tried to think of a way to keep Ruth blameless. “I fell in love with a fortune hunter who abandoned me when my father refused to sanction our match and cast me out. Since then, I have been forced to scavenge on the streets.” She paused to take another breath and buy herself a few more moments. She was trying her best to remember Christine’s tale, but fear and shame were clouding her mind. She knew that even a single wrong detail could mean the end of her charade, resulting in her and Ruth facing a fate worse than marrying a scoundrel Comte.

Floundering, she decided that she would add a small piece of the truth into her tale. “I have nowhere else to go, with a father who does not want me and a man who no longer loves me. I was simply trying to find a way to get to the New World and start over.”

The man’s eyes flickered with what Charlotte felt sure was amusement, but, if it was, it was well concealed. He nodded slowly, glancing at Ruth. Charlotte’s heart sank to her stomach.

“What about your friend here?” he asked.

“Is she on the run as well?”

Ruth tensed up, and Charlotte shook her head.

“This is Ruthie,” she said, wincing at once. Why had she not come up with something else? Ruthie was too close to her maid’s real name. But there was nothing she could do about it now. She decided to remain as honest as possible. “She is my maid.”

The man looked at her skeptically.

“If you have no money, how can you pay a maid?” he asked.

Ruth spoke at last.

“I agreed to be her maid in exchange for the chance to go to the New World and receive the same opportunities as Christine,” she said quietly.

Charlotte said a silent prayer of gratitude for Ruth's quick thinking. She and Ruth had known each other since they were children. Ruth and her mother had worked for Charlotte's family since both were young girls. After her mother died when they were in their early teens, Ruth stayed on as Charlotte's lady's maid. Truthfully, she was glad that Ruth had fought to stay behind with her, instead of going to France with Christine, though she also felt guilty, because she knew how excited Ruth had been about France.

The gentleman continued to study the women, his expression unreadable. Charlotte felt sure that he did not believe a word of their tale and was about to turn them over to the authorities. She cursed herself for being so impulsive and getting them into such a mess.

At long last, the gentleman broke the silence.

“Well, I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” he began, and Charlotte’s heart sank. Of course, he was going to have them arrested.

What man in his right mind would not?

He glanced behind them at the crate in which they had sought refuge, and chuckled. Charlotte was confused. Did he find stowaways humorous?

“You were never going to make it to the New World. Not on this ship, anyway,” he continued.

Charlotte exchanged a look with Ruth.

“I do not understand,” she said. “There are ships that sail there from this dock, are there not?”

The gentleman nodded.

“Oh yes, indeed,” he said. “But I am afraid that my ships only go to France.”

Charlotte’s heart sank. Of course, it would be exactly her luck that the one way out of her predicament would put her in the very place she was trying to avoid.

The gentleman was paying much closer attention to her reactions than Charlotte would have preferred. He was studying her with great care, and she did her best to hide her disappointment. She could not blame him for his close scrutiny. She could not imagine how she might feel if she were in his position, but she felt her cheeks growing hotter and wished that he would either turn them in to the authorities or let them go.

At last, the man spoke.

“What is it about the New World that was so important?” he asked.

“It’s a new world,” Charlotte muttered without thinking.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked.

Charlotte shook her head, the additional embarrassment of her careless utterance infuriating her.

“I know that I have no right to press you, as we are certainly in no position to demand anything of you at this moment,” Charlotte began.

“You are correct about that,” the gentleman said gently, cutting her off. “But that does not mean that you do not deserve the chance to speak your piece.”

Charlotte took a deep breath, wondering at the motives of this kind, handsome gentleman.

“What I mean to ask is, what do you plan to do with us?” she asked. “We have caused a spectacle for long enough. If you wish to arrest us, we could hardly blame you, but, if not, I think that we would all benefit from a quick end to this public display.”

The gentleman chuckled.

“I can appreciate the way you think,” he said, “and you are not wrong.”

Charlotte felt relief wash over her. She could not begin to guess what their fate would be, but at least the man seemed reasonable and rational. Not wanting to push her luck, she remained silent and watched the man with careful eyes.

Instead of answering her inquiry right away, however, he clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing. Charlotte thought that her heart might explode in her chest, and one glance at Ruth told her she felt the same way. She bit her lip to keep from repeating her

earlier questions, praying that the situation would be resolved quickly.

All at once, the gentleman looked at her again. For the first time, Charlotte noticed the kindness in his eyes, and how prominent the laugh lines around his mouth were. A shiver went down her spine, and she found herself relaxing more than anyone in her position probably should. She sighed and awaited his next words.

“Here are my thoughts,” he said.

Charlotte and Ruth both nodded, neither daring to exchange looks again.

“The two of you are apparently not thieves,” he continued. “Nor, as I see it, are you criminals.”

Ruth uttered a quiet sob. Charlotte bit her lip and stayed silent, opting to send up silent prayers of both gratitude and wonder at this turn of events.

“What I think I will do is offer you employment,” he said at last.

It took Charlotte a moment to understand what he had said. She had expected many things, but the offer of a job was not one of them.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked.

The gentleman chuckled again.

“You said that you wanted to go to the

New World in search of employment,” he said.

Charlotte gave herself a mental shake,
furious with herself for forgetting the story she
had told.

“Yes, my lord,” she said.

The man nodded.

“Well, it just so happens that I am
looking for an assistant,” he said. “I need help
organizing the many details of my business

ventures.”

Charlotte lifted her head and looked at the man curiously. She had only just met him, and he was offering her employment. Who was he?

As though he read her mind, he smiled.

“I assure you that my business ventures are all proper and legal,” he said. “I would not ask you to do anything that was otherwise.”

Charlotte nodded.

“I was merely wondering why you would offer such an opportunity to a perfect stranger,” she said honestly.

The gentleman nodded.

“That is a fair question,” he said. “It is because I feel that the debt of your transgression would be better addressed in my service than at the hands of a cold justice system.” Before she could respond, he ceased

his pacing and looked directly into her eyes.

“Especially since it seems that this would be a mutually beneficial arrangement. Do you not agree?”

Charlotte swallowed the sob of relief she felt building in her throat. She stood up straighter and met his gaze.

“I would certainly agree,” she said.

The man nodded once more.

“Very good,” he said. “Do we have an agreement?”

Despite the great kindness this stranger was offering her, Charlotte still felt some reluctance to give up her scheme of escaping to the New World. She knew that if she stayed in London for too long, someone would surely identify her and inform her father. She was not sure if she could risk it, for either herself or for Ruth.

The gentleman smiled.

“Fret not, Miss Becker,” he said. “If you should find work in my employ not to your liking and still wish to go to the New World, I will endeavor to help you reach there.”

Charlotte gasped, embarrassed that her face had betrayed her thoughts. She collected herself quickly and squared her shoulders.

“If it means that we shall not see the inside of a jail cell,” she said, “then I suppose I will gladly accept your offer, kind sir.”

Chapter 4

Duncan watched the women closely, waiting for Christine's response. There was something about her, about her story, that seemed false, but he could not quite put his finger on it. He did not believe she was a criminal evading justice, but he felt certain that Christine was not being entirely honest with him.

He was also certain that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He could not begin to guess what secrets she could be

harboring, but he was fascinated by her, and he wanted to get to know her better. He felt that, when she was ready, Christine would learn to trust him and tell him her secrets.

At last, Christine took a deep breath.

“Well, if it means that we do not see the inside of a jail cell, then I suppose that I gladly accept your offer, sir,” she said, with a slight curtsy.

Duncan found himself releasing a breath

that he did not realize he had been holding.

He smiled at the blond woman and bowed deeply to her.

“It has certainly been a pleasure doing business with you, Miss Becker,” he said, not realizing how true the words were until he said them aloud.

Both women curtsied to him, but only Christine met his eyes.

“A pleasure, indeed,” she said. “When

will I begin my work?”

Duncan froze. He had not considered anything further than extending the job offer. He had half expected her to reject him at once and flee when his guard was down. After a brief second, however, he recovered.

“Tomorrow morning, if that is agreeable,” he said.

The women exchanged another look, one which he was pleased to see was more curious

and thoughtful than distressed and fearful.

Christine cleared her throat.

“Tomorrow morning would be perfect,”
she said.

Duncan nodded, pleased that she had decided to stay instead of running. If he were honest with himself, he would not have thwarted any further attempts to flee.

In fact, he would hardly have blamed

them. He felt certain they both knew that had he chosen to press charges, he would have done so by that point. And he knew that, scared and confused as they were, they had at least determined that he intended them no harm. However, he found himself glad that they did not run, nonetheless. “Very well,” he said. “Then let us move this discussion away from all these curious eyes.”

The women looked at one another once more, and then back at him. Rather than address them directly and tell them of his

plans, however, he opted for a more cryptic approach.

“May I escort you ladies from the docks?”
he asked.

Christine looked at him, apprehensive
but curious.

“I suppose that you have every right to
insist we accompany you,” she said. “Where
are we going?”

Duncan smiled, his plan forming second by second as he spoke.

“If you will place as much trust in me as I have placed in you, you shall soon see,” he said.

With a hesitant nod, Christine gave him a small smile. As tense and worried as the expression was, it made her seem even more beautiful, and his heart skipped a beat. He smiled back politely, wondering at the effect that the lovely blond woman was having on

him.

Duncan called for a carriage to take the women and himself to his inn, which was not far from the docks. The relief on the women's faces was almost tangible, and Duncan knew that whatever they had been through, it must have been difficult. He was grateful that it was he who had found them, and not some other ship owner. He also found that he was very glad to have met Christine. The more he looked at her, the more beautiful she seemed, and he could not wait to learn more about her.

Moments later, the carriage pulled up in front of his well-appointed inn. The women gasped in unison, and Duncan relished the slight flush that came to Christine's cheeks as she looked in awe at the building.

“This is yours?” she asked, not taking her eyes off the building.

“I am proud to say that it is,” he said, feeling his own cheeks grow warm.

“It is beautiful,” Ruth said, her look of wonder matching her mistress’s.

“You are very kind to say so,” he said.

“Would the two of you like a tour?”

The women looked at him simultaneously and gave him enthusiastic nods in unison.

Their giddiness was infectious, and he could not help but laugh. He helped the women out of the carriage and escorted them through the doors that led to the inn’s lobby.

“I thought you exported wine,” Christine said absently, taking in the lobby décor.

Duncan laughed.

“I do,” he said. “I am also an inn owner, and the ninth Duke of Willeton.”

The two women gasped and looked at him.

“Forgive me, Your Grace,” Christine said, blushing. “I did not realize.”

Ruthie stared at him, seemingly unsure of what to say.

“Do not worry,” he said. “I shall not have you arrested simply because you do not know who I am.”

Christine looked at him, her face pale and eyes wide, until she saw the twinkle in Duncan’s own eyes. Then, she began to laugh.

“I wonder if I could convince them to

arrest you for attempting to give two young women heart attacks,” she teased.

Duncan laughed heartily.

“Perhaps, if the young women in question had not first given me a heart attack by falling out of one of my shipping crates.”

Both women laughed along with him, as he led them toward the staircase. He watched with delight, as they looked at the deep purple and blue drapes and upholstery in awe. The

brass fixtures had just been polished and shined brilliantly.

Duncan finished the tour by leading the women to the polished wood desk in the lobby, behind which sat an older woman. She looked up at the duke and gave him a small, professional smile.

“Good day, my lord,” she said. “Do you have some additional duties for me?”

Duncan shook his head.

“No, Hilda,” he said. “However, I would like you to ensure that these two women have a room as quickly as possible.”

Hilda nodded.

“Will they be paying for the room now?” she asked.

Duncan held up his hand.

“They will be staying here as my guests,” he said.

Hilda looked at the trio with a curious expression, but she simply nodded.

“Yes, my lord,” she said. “I will see to it that there is a room prepared at once.”

When Hilda left the desk, Christine turned to Duncan, her cheeks red.

“You are too kind, my lord,” she said.

Duncan smiled kindly.

“Not at all,” he said. “I am happy to be of service.” He paused, reaching into his pocket and fishing out several shillings. “This should be enough for some food for the two of you for the next couple of days.” He held out his hand to Christine.

The women gasped, and Christine held up her hand.

“We could not possibly accept such generosity,” she insisted. “Especially as you

have already been so kind.”

Duncan shook his head.

“You misunderstand,” he said. “This is not charity. This is an advance on your salary. As you will be starting work tomorrow, I have decided that giving you a little bit of the money you will be earning to purchase food would only be prudent.”

Ruth put a hand to her mouth. Christine blinked and glanced away. At last, however,

she reached out and took the shillings from
Duncan's hand.

“You truly are most gracious, my lord,”
she said.

“You will be helping me every bit as
much as I am helping you, I assure you,” he
said warmly.

Their attention was drawn to Hilda as
she reentered the lobby.

“The room is ready,” she said. “It will be the third room at the top of the staircase.”

Duncan smiled kindly at the receptionist.

“Thank you, Hilda,” he said. Then he turned back to Ruth and Christine. “Would you ladies like me to show you to your room?”

Both women blushed, but Christine looked at him, her eyes full of gratitude and awe.

“That would be wonderful, Lord Lancaster,” she said.

Duncan escorted the women back up the stairs. He had already shown them the upstairs during their tour, but he did not miss how the women still surveyed their surroundings with admiration.

His heart swelled with pride that his establishment had them such awe. He was also amazed that they had turned into such different women from the two he had

discovered trying to steal aboard his ship. He especially admired the flush that came to Christine's cheeks as she looked around the inn. It was clear that simple things brought joy to her heart, and that made her even more beautiful to him. He could not guess at why she felt she had to flee to the New World, but it pleased him to see that she could still feel safe and happy in his inn.

Unable to resist, he took a deep breath.

“So, Miss Becker,” he said, as he opened

the door to the room that would belong to Christine and Ruthie. “Would you care to tell me a little about yourself? You will be starting to work for me tomorrow, after all.”

Christine seemed to barely hear him, staring at the lavishness of the room with rounded eyes. Duncan was beginning to believe that the women truly had never seen such lavish décor, though he still doubted that it was because they were entirely unfamiliar with the upper ton.

Christine said nothing for several long moments, as she and Ruth surveyed the room. They shared a few glances, but no words were exchanged.

At last, Christine turned to face him.

“I have told you all that you need to know for now,” she said. “I am a foolish girl who trusted the wrong man and was cast out of her home for it. I would prefer to focus on the future.”

Once again, Duncan found himself taken by her. She was mysterious and apparently both proud and diplomatic. He thought that, even if he did not know every single thing about her, she was someone he wished to have working for him. And her beauty was certainly unmatched.

“Fair enough,” he conceded at last. “Will you at least promise to be forthright with me from tomorrow? I must know that I can trust those in my employ completely.”

Christine seemed to pale, but she looked him in the eye with little hesitation.

“I promise you, my lord, that I will never do anything that would compromise your reputation or your business,” she said.

Duncan thought for a moment. He understood there were things she was not saying, but he also knew that he trusted her.

“Very well,” he said reluctantly. “I suppose that is all I can reasonably ask of

someone in my employ. I do expect full honesty from you, and you can expect the same from me.”

Christine flushed deeply, and once more Duncan found himself wondering what it was that the lovely young woman was hiding.

“I will do my best to be forthcoming with you from this point onward, my lord,” she said quietly.

“Very good,” Duncan said. Despite her

secrecy, Duncan felt he could trust her, and he decided that whatever she was keeping from him could wait. He smiled at the women.

“Then I will leave you ladies to your own devices. Be sure to let Hilda know if there is anything she can do for you.”

Christine beamed at him, and the look made him melt.

“Thank you so much for everything,” she repeated. “You are too kind.”

Duncan smiled.

I can make no such claims,” he said. “But I would like to think that I am a fair and just man.”

Christine nodded, clearly trying to hide her tears of gratitude.

“Indeed, you are,” she said. “I will not make you regret it.”

“Very good,” Duncan said. “Then I will

expect to see you first thing tomorrow morning.”

With a final farewell, Duncan left the two women. As the day progressed, he found that only one of them occupied his thoughts. He was greatly impressed with Miss Christine Becker, and he could not wait to know more about her.

Chapter 5

Charlotte stared after Duncan just a little longer than perhaps she should have, as he departed. A giggle beside her pulled her attention back into the room. Charlotte looked at her maid, eyebrows raised.

“What?” she asked innocently.

Ruth giggled again.

“Do you mean to tell me that you did not notice how handsome he is?” she asked, giving her mistress a knowing look. “Or did you think

I did not notice that you noticed?”

Charlotte gave her maid’s shoulder a gentle shove.

“You are wicked,” she said. “We are fortunate that he is as kind as he is handsome.”

Ruth nodded solemnly.

“We certainly are,” she said.

Charlotte took her hands, her face
growing serious.

“I am so sorry that I have landed you in
such a mess,” she said. “If it had not been for
my wild ideas earlier, we would be on our
way to France now, and I would not have
almost gotten you arrested.”

Ruth laughed.

“Nonsense,” she said. “Now that all is
said and done, that was the most fun I have

had in as long as I can remember.”

Charlotte laughed. She had to admit that it had been something of an adventure for her, too, though it would have been much less fun had things gone differently.

“Perhaps, however, we will not press our luck so much again,” Ruth volunteered.

Charlotte laughed again and nodded.

“Ruth,” she said. “I think that our luck is changing.”

* * *

The next morning, Ruth was frantically trying to help Charlotte put her hair into a neat, professional-looking style. She kept twisting strands of her hair this way and that, and Charlotte could not help but laugh.

“If I did not know better, I would think that you are more nervous than I am,” she said.

Ruth looked at Charlotte, her cheeks flushed.

“We must make you look like a respectable working woman, not the daughter of an earl,” she said, feigning a reproachful expression.

Charlotte nodded.

“Of course, you are right,” she said.

In truth, she had not slept well the night

before. She had lain awake, thinking about the lies she had told Duncan. She felt more than a little guilty for being dishonest with a man who turned out to be so kind and compassionate, and part of her wished that she could go back and tell him the truth.

She would have done anything to avoid her marriage to the Comte, however, and that involved keeping her true identity a secret. Since her new employer was a duke, he would certainly know her father, and she could not be sure that Duncan would not tell her father

what she had done.

She consoled herself with the notion that, though she had been forced to lie about her name, she would be true to her real character and personality.

Ruth paused in her work on Charlotte's hair and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Do not fret,” she said. “The hard part is over. He is a kind man, and I am of the opinion that things will be better now.”

Charlotte nodded, wishing she felt as certain.

“We can certainly hope so, at least,” she said. Just then, there came a knock on the door. Ruth rushed over to open it and was greeted by one of the inn’s staff.

“Your carriage is waiting, ma’am,” the woman said.

Charlotte stared at her for a moment,

temporarily forgetting that, as Christine Becker, no one would be addressing her as a lady.

“Oh, yes,” she said, quickly recovering.

“Thank you.”

The woman nodded brusquely and took her leave, and Ruth finished Charlotte’s hair with a quick flourish.

“There we are,” she said, looking pleased with her work.

Charlotte smiled.

“It looks wonderful, Ruth,” she said.

“Thank you.”

Ruth returned her smile.

“Good luck, my lady,” she said.

Charlotte squeezed her maid's hands,
then she rushed out of the door and outside to
the waiting carriage.

The ride to Duncan's estate was a peaceful one. There was little traffic, and the weather was mild and pleasant. Charlotte breathed in the fresh air, as she worked to calm herself. She was nervous about working for Duncan, at least in part because he was very handsome indeed. His curly, ear-length blond hair was beautiful and perfectly complimented his light blue eyes. His smile was infectious, and his strong jaw was smooth and handsome. Her heart raced, and she forced herself to push the image of his face out of her mind.

The estate was as impressive as she had expected. The manor sprawled across what seemed to be an endless expanse of land. Even though she knew that he was the ninth duke in his lineage, the house and grounds were so well maintained that it could have all been built and planted as recently as that morning. Everything looked fresh, new, and inviting, and the gardens took her breath away. In that moment, she realized how glad she was that she had stayed in London and sent Christine to France in her place.

Duncan himself greeted her when the coach came to a stop. He helped her out and bowed to her as her feet touched the ground.

“Good morning, Miss Becker,” he said.

Charlotte smiled, suddenly feeling shy.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said.

“Come,” he said. “Let us go into the study, and we will discuss the extent of your

duties.”

Charlotte frowned, realizing that she had failed to ask what sort of work she would be doing for him.

“Of course, my lord,” she said.

The inside of the manor was even more impressive and well-maintained than the outside. All the furniture was of a deep, red wood, and the tapestries were a rich green. Lighter green and gold upholstery accented

many of the chairs and benches, and all the paintings she could see hung in gold frames.

She tried, with some difficulty, to behave as though the sumptuous surroundings were of little consequence, but, even as the daughter of an earl, she had never seen such an ornately decorated home.

Her father had always preferred dull and drab décor, and she had fully expected that to be reflected throughout the ton, if not the world. Yet, as she took in the duke's lavish

furnishings, she found herself in awe. Luckily for her, that was what Duncan was expecting, and, for the first time since she had concocted her false identity, she gladly hid behind the façade.

“I promise to give you a proper tour, once the official business has concluded,” he said, as he watched her take in her surroundings.

Charlotte nodded respectfully.

“I would enjoy that,” she said.

They made their way to Duncan’s study, Charlotte admiring the house the entire way. She tried not to seem like a child marveling at new toys, but she was impressed with how the décor in Duncan’s home was both decadent and comfortable. As they ascended the stairs, she rehearsed her role as Christine. She was determined that, should Duncan question her story, he would not find any inconsistencies.

At last, they reached the study. Duncan

held open the door for her, and she stepped into a room that, unsurprisingly, was just as impressive as the rest of the house. The desk was a deep, red-brown wood, highly polished, and seemingly untouched. If not for the stacks of papers resting neatly atop the desk, Charlotte would have thought it had never been used. She shook her head and looked at Duncan, waiting for him to get himself situated behind the desk.

Instead, he gestured to one of the chairs on the guest side of his desk, pulling it out a

few inches from the edge. Charlotte smiled gratefully and took the seat, knowing better than to offend the man who had not only decided not to have her arrested, but was also offering her a job. Once she was seated, Duncan at last moved to the large chair on the other side of the desk and made himself comfortable.

“Please, make yourself at home,” he said. Charlotte tried her best to relax, but her heart was roaring louder than Duncan’s words. She knew that if she said even a single thing

wrong, it could be the end of the tenuous plan that she had so rapidly concocted on the docks when she had happened upon Christine Becker.

Fortunately, it seemed that Duncan was more than happy to lead the conversation. He sat down in his chair and clasped his hands in front of him.

“I can appreciate that we are both people who need little small talk,” he said, “and so I shall spare us both. I hired you because I need

someone to help keep my office neat and tidy, and to greet my business associates.”

Charlotte kept a stoic face.

“Does your house staff not meet those requirements to your satisfaction?” she asked.

Duncan smiled.

“They do well enough,” he said. “And well enough is good enough for me. However, I do not wish to burden them with any extra

duties. Things related to my business, or the area in which I do the bulk of my business, should not be added to their workload. At least, they will not be if I can help it.”

Charlotte stared at Duncan, both impressed and surprised. Most men of his station would be far from concerned about adding more duties to his household staff. However, it seemed that Duncan sincerely cared about his employees. She realized that he was someone for whom she could likely work happily. Nevertheless, she also knew that

she could not sound too desperate or seem too quick to accept his job offer. She thought hard for something else to ask him.

“Are you not looking for someone with previous experience in secretarial work?” she asked.

Duncan shook his head.

“Not at all,” he said. “This is not the type of work that a professional secretary would handle. It is not very complicated. I merely

seek an extra set of eyes and pair of hands, so that, while I am away, my business associates know that I am well organized and still attentive to their needs. I do not believe that job requires any special set of skills, except for politeness and professionalism.”

Charlotte nodded. She understood what he was saying, but she knew how important it was that she pretend to consider his words carefully. In truth, she would take any position he offered her, even if it involved scrubbing floors, but she could not let him know that.

“Very well,” she said. “Will there be any other duties required of me?”

Duncan shrugged.

“I cannot say for certain at this time,” he said. “If I were to require more of you, I imagine that you and I could discuss that when the time comes. I certainly would not expect you to do anything for which I am not paying you.”

Charlotte nodded, seeing an opportunity that she felt ashamed for not considering sooner.

“And what of Ruthie?” she asked. “Do you have any work for her? I cannot simply leave her without a way to earn her keep, not after the sacrifice she made for me in exchange for a mere promise. You understand.”

Duncan sat back in his chair.

“Of course,” he said. “I have not

forgotten about her.”

Charlotte waited for him to continue, but he remained silent for several moments. She opened her mouth to press the issue again, but then Duncan smiled.

“What if I were to also offer her a job, after a one-week trial period with you?” he asked.

Charlotte thought for a moment. Considering that, just the day before, this man

had had every right to have the two of them thrown in jail without a second thought, she believed that the offer was more than fair.

However, she realized once more that she could not seem too desperate. She pretended to mull over the offer, knowing full well that Ruth would be elated to hear of the proposition.

“That sounds fair,” she said at last.

Duncan smiled, and Charlotte thought again how young and joyful it made him look.

“Very good,” he said. “Let me show you around the office, and then the rest of the house, if you would like.”

Charlotte smiled, her first real smile since the beginning of this insane scheme.

“I would love that,” she said.

Chapter 6

Duncan finished helping Christine become acquainted with the house and prepared for her duties, which were to begin the following day. Then, he reluctantly walked her to her carriage. He wished that he could find an excuse to keep her there a little while longer, but, as her employer, he did not feel it was appropriate to ask her to linger for a social visit. As she turned to face him instead of immediately boarding her carriage, however, he could not help but smile.

“I cannot thank you enough,” she said.

“For everything. You truly are a kind and fair man, and both Ruthie and I will be forever grateful.”

Duncan dipped his head, his smile widening.

“It hardly seemed fitting to send two young women to jail who were quite clearly in an unfortunate position,” he said. “Needing a bit of help is hardly a crime.”

Christine nodded solemnly.

“Not everyone would have shown such compassion,” she said. “It is quite rare. I wanted you to know that Ruthie and I both know how blessed we are that it was you who found us in that crate.”

Duncan bowed.

“Speaking of Ruthie,” he said. “As I mentioned, I intend to hire her after you have worked for me for one week. Please, invite her

to come here any day this week, so that I may give her the same tour that I gave you and determine what employment would be most suitable for her.”

Christine smiled and clasped her hands in front of her chest.

“You are most gracious, my lord,” she said. “I will let her know, and, on her behalf, I thank you, very much.”

Duncan tipped his head again.

“You are most welcome, Miss Becker,” he said.

At last, Christine boarded the carriage and too soon disappeared from his view. He knew that he had only just met her, and that she would be returning the very next morning, but he could not help feeling a sense of loss at her departure. He decided to keep himself occupied by getting things ready for her arrival the following day.

As he had hoped, Christine arrived a quarter of an hour early. Her lovely blond hair was pulled up in a neat style, and her eyes sparkled with a cautious enthusiasm. His heart skipped a beat as she approached the front doorway where he was waiting.

“Good morning, Miss Becker,” he said with a bow.

Christine smiled and blushed, giving him a modest curtsy.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said.

Duncan gestured for her to come inside.

“You are just in time to join me for breakfast, if you like,” he said.

Christine smiled gratefully.

“You are too kind, my lord,” she said. “I do not wish to impose.”

Duncan smiled brightly.

“It is no imposition at all, Miss Becker,”
he said. “Please, I insist.”

Christine smiled again.

“Thank you,” she said.

Duncan led Christine into the breakfast room, where the meal was already being served. He gestured to his servants to bring a plate for Christine, then pulled out a chair for her. She smiled warmly and seated herself.

Once she was comfortable, Duncan took his own seat.

“How is Ruthie liking the inn?” Duncan asked.

Christine beamed at him.

“She is most grateful for the accommodations,” she said. “It really is a lovely, comfortable place.”

Duncan smiled.

“I am glad to hear it,” he said.

“She said that she would come tomorrow or the day after to speak with you about work,” Christine said.

Duncan chuckled.

“She wants to be sure that I am not a tyrant of a boss,” he teased.

Christine blushed.

“She is very shy,” she said. “She just wanted to be sure that all went well for me before she got her hopes up.”

Duncan nodded.

“That is perfectly fine, Miss Becker,” he said. “In the meantime, I am very glad to have you here.”

Duncan watched her blush deepen, once more noticing her beauty.

“I am very grateful for the opportunity, my lord,” she said.

After breakfast, Duncan set her about her first tasks. She seemed comfortable with Duncan supervising her while she worked, and he was thrilled for the opportunity to do so. None of the tasks she would be doing were particularly difficult, and she was very quick to learn.

In fact, Duncan had to do very little in the way of explaining what he wanted, or how

he wanted it done. She worked efficiently and was eager to move on to the next task as soon as she had finished. He knew he had made a wise decision to hire her, and he hoped that she would choose to stay on with him for a long time.

Christine's first day of work ended too soon, and Duncan felt the now familiar disappointment at the idea of her impending departure. Since she had been working all day, he had not wished to distract her by engaging her in conversation. Nevertheless, he truly

wanted to learn more about her. As Christine approached him after finishing her last task for the day, Duncan thought quickly.

“You have done an excellent job today,” he said, smiling warmly.

Christine smiled, clearly proud of her work.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said.

“Would you allow me to pay for your

dinner tonight, to say thank you?” he asked.

“Ruthie, too, of course.”

Christine laughed.

“My lord, I believe that the salary you are paying me is a more than sufficient show of gratitude,” she said.

Duncan laughed.

“You are quite right,” he said. “Still, you must eat until you receive your first payment,

correct?”

Christine nodded.

“Yes, we must,” she said. “But we still have a small amount of money. You have already done so much for us. We could not ask for anything further.”

“You are not asking, Miss Becker,” Duncan said warmly. “I am not only offering, I am insisting. Please, won’t you and Ruthie dine with me tonight?”

Christine blushed. The glow made her more beautiful still, and Duncan prayed she would agree.

“If you insist, my lord,” Christine said, smiling up at him. “Then how could we refuse?”

“Wonderful,” Duncan said. He gathered his coat and gestured to the front door. “Shall we?”

* * *

When they arrived at the inn, Christine rushed up the stairs to retrieve Ruth. Duncan waited in the foyer, nodding a greeting to the woman behind the desk. She smiled, then returned to her paperwork. After a few moments, Christine and Ruthie descended the stairs. Ruthie was blushing and kept her eyes cast downward. Christine, however, looked as though she had freshened up a little, and was smiling.

Duncan bowed when the women
approached.

“Good evening, Ruthie,” he said, looking
kindly at the maid.

Ruthie curtsied, daring to glance up at
Duncan.

“Good evening, my lord,” she said.

“Thank you for your kind invitation.”

“Not at all, Ruthie,” he said. Then he

looked at Christine. “Are we ready?”

Christine nodded. He offered her his arm and showed them into the inn’s dining room.

The place was moderately crowded, but they had no trouble finding a table. Duncan led the women to sit by one of the large windows and held out their chairs for them. Then he chose his own seat, conveniently beside Christine. The women were looking around in awe, and Duncan’s smile saddened. What had they been through before he found

them?

“This is a lovely place, my lord,” Ruth
breathed.

Christine nodded in agreement.

“It is beautiful,” she said.

Duncan smiled.

“The food is also exquisite,” he said.

“Do you own this establishment, too?”

Christine asked.

Duncan shook his head.

“No,” he said. “But one of my friends
does.”

“He certainly does a wonderful job,” she
said.

“That he does,” Duncan agreed.

When the meals and wine arrived at their table, Duncan raised his glass. The two women exchanged a look, then raised their own.

“A toast to your decision to stow away in my shipping crate,” he said, his eyes twinkling.

The women giggled in unison and raised their glasses. They all took a sip of the wine and began partaking of their meals.

“So, Miss Becker,” Duncan said, while

they ate. “Where are you from?”

Christine paused, her face unreadable.

She finished taking the bite he had disrupted and chewed slowly. She gently placed her fork down beside her plate and smiled at him.

“I grew up in Plymouth,” she said.

Beside her, Ruthie began coughing.

Duncan started to rise to assist her, but she held up her hand. She took a long sip from her wine and then smiled sheepishly at Duncan.

“Do forgive me, my lord,” she said, her cheeks a deep crimson. “It was just a rogue bite of beef.”

Duncan studied her for a moment, trying to assure himself that she was alright. At last, he sat down again, and offered Ruthie his handkerchief. She politely declined, pulling her own out of her dress pocket.

“I have one,” she said, her voice hoarse from the choking fit. “Thank you kindly, my

lord.”

“Of course,” he said, at last moving his gaze back to Christine. She had put her hand on the maid’s shoulder, and her face was as red as Ruthie’s.

“Are you alright?” Christine asked, concerned.

Ruth nodded.

“I am fine now,” she whispered. “Thank

you both.”

She and Christine exchanged a look that he could not read, and then she smiled weakly at Duncan.

“I am just glad that you are well,” he said. He poured the maid a little more wine. She smiled gratefully at him and took another long drink, and Christine followed suit.

Once he was sure that Ruthie was alright, he turned back to Christine.

“Have you worked for anyone else in the town?” he asked.

Christine tilted her head.

“Will a lack of professional experience affect my employment with you?” she asked.

Duncan shook his head.

“Not at all,” he said. “I was merely curious as to any experience you might have

had previously.”

Christine shook her head slowly.

“I have none,” she said.

Duncan nodded.

“Do you spend a lot of time socializing within the ton, then?” he asked.

Christine blanched. She took another sip of wine before answering him.

“I do not do much socializing at all,” she said.

Duncan frowned.

“A shame,” he said. “Why is that?”

Christine fidgeted in her seat. Ruth was looking at her warily from the corner of her eye.

“Forgive me, my lord, but I do not see

what my social habits have to do with my employment,” she said.

Duncan blinked. Her voice had been soft, not sharp or harsh, but her words had caught him off guard. It was becoming clear that she was uncomfortable answering questions about herself, and Duncan worried that he had pried too much. He looked at her and smiled sheepishly.

“Of course, Miss Becker,” he said. “You are quite right. Forgive me for asking so many

questions.”

Christine blushed, avoiding his gaze while she pushed her food around on her plate.

“No,” she said. “You have every right to ask someone you have hired any question you wish. It is just that I am rather dull. There is not much of interest about me, and it will likely only bore you.”

Duncan studied her thoughtfully.

Somehow, he doubted very much that there was nothing of interest about Christine, but, for some reason, she did not trust him enough to open up. However, he knew that he would not earn her trust by continuing to press her, no matter how badly he wished to know her better.

At last, he smiled.

“Well,” he said. “There is nothing wrong with being a little reserved and predictable.”

Christine met his eyes then, her lips
curling up into a smirk.

“Oh,” she said. “I never said that I was
predictable. A predictable person would not
have climbed inside of a shipping crate to get
aboard a stranger’s ship.”

Duncan laughed.

“A fair point,” he said. “Nevertheless, I
will not pry into your business any further.”

Christine smiled at him gratefully.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said.

Duncan smiled and nodded in response, then turned his attention back to his plate. The rest of the meal was full of lighthearted conversation and delicious food and wine, but he could not stop trying to understand Christine. He did not know what it was that was holding her back from confiding in him, but he hoped that in time she would come to trust him. There was something about her that

intrigued him, and she was incredibly beautiful. He would indeed cease his prying, but he would not give up on getting to know the lovely young woman.

Chapter 7

Charlotte and Ruth had hardly closed the door to their room behind them before Ruth put her hands on Charlotte's shoulders.

“Are you raving mad?” she asked, her eyes wide.

Charlotte shook her head, trying to keep calm and find a way to explain herself.

“No, Ruth,” she said. “He caught me off guard, and I could hardly take the time to

come up with lies for every question he asked.”

Ruth shook her head, studying Charlotte.

“What if he starts asking after a woman named Christine Becker from Plymouth?” she asked. “Or about any of the other things you told him?”

Charlotte thought about how warm and trusting Duncan was, and how kind he had been to her earlier that day. The memory

calmed her, and she gently removed Ruth's hands from her arms.

“We need to tell as much of the truth as we can, even in this situation,” Charlotte said, her voice low and calm. “It will not do to continue spinning tales so tall and intricate that we get lost in them. I despise lying as it is, especially to such a kind man.” She smiled. “Besides, Lord Willetton has proven to be very generous and compassionate, and not exactly the prying type.”

Ruth seemed to calm down, too. She nodded, a small smile spreading across her face.

“How was it?” she asked. “Is he truly as kind as he seemed on the docks?” she asked.

Charlotte patted her hand.

“He is even kinder than he first appeared,” she said. “He is wonderful to work for, and he took no issue with your choice in waiting to come speak with him. Which is why

I am telling you not to worry so much.”

Ruth put her hand on her chest and
sighed with relief.

“And the house?” she asked. “How is it?”

Charlotte took a deep breath, recalling
vividly every detail of the estate.

“It is incredible,” she said. “Such rich
colors, and so grand.”

Ruth clasped her hands in her lap, a dreamy expression on her face.

“We certainly are fortunate,” she said.

Charlotte nodded, trying to ignore the tugging at her heart. She knew that their good fortune was tenuous, and that it all depended on their lies.

“We deserve it,” she said. She knew well that Ruth deserved it. She just wished that she could believe that she did as well.

The next morning, Ruth decided that she would go with Charlotte to speak with Duncan. The two women hurried to ready themselves, and Charlotte rushed them into the carriage.

Duncan had been pleased that she had arrived early the previous morning, and she wanted to ensure that they would repeat that behavior. When they arrived, the butler greeted the women and led them into the breakfast room where Duncan was seated. As

the two women entered the room, Duncan leapt from his chair, a wide smile on his face.

“Good morning, ladies,” he said, rushing to greet them. He bowed to Ruth. “It is wonderful to see you again, Ruthie.”

Ruth curtsayed, flushing.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said softly. “I hope we arrived at a good time.”

Duncan nodded enthusiastically.

“It is a perfect time,” he said. “Please, join me for breakfast.”

The two women shared an excited look, then accepted Duncan’s invitation.

That day went as smoothly as the one before. Ruth settled into her work, helping pen letters, and making preparations for the servants whom Duncan asked to run errands.

By the end of the day, Ruth was beaming,

and Charlotte's heart warmed. She was glad to see her maid and friend getting on so well.

Duncan had been every bit as kind to Ruth as he had been to Charlotte the previous day, and Charlotte began to think that they would be all right.

In the following days, the three of them settled into a routine. They had breakfast with Duncan most mornings, and then they began their work. The women began to become acquainted with several of the servants, and Charlotte found them all very pleasant and

warm. Duncan was often gone for several hours during the day attending to business in town, but, when he was there, Charlotte often caught him watching her, a look of admiration on his face. She did a fair bit of looking at him, too. She could not ignore how handsome he was, and his blue eyes always seemed to sparkle with warmth and happiness. When she was not glancing at him, he occupied most of her thoughts. She wondered if perhaps fate had crossed their paths for another purpose, aside from providing her asylum from a future she could not bear to live.

She smiled one day, as she sorted through the items on Duncan's desk. He was already quite neat and organized, and it hardly seemed as though he needed someone to keep things tidy for him.

Even before he left on business, it never took her long to organize his desk and office. If she did not know better, she would have thought that he intentionally ensured her job was simple by cleaning up himself at the end of every day. The two things of which she was

completely certain was that she thoroughly enjoyed working for him, and that she enjoyed his company more every day. Indeed, she found that she missed him when he left to conduct business, and she looked forward to his return.

As she thought about Duncan, Charlotte felt a twist of guilt in her stomach. It was clear that he was quickly coming to trust her, and she was very happy working for him.

However, the lie she had told him nagged at her, taking away from what should have been

a great relief.

She was no longer betrothed to a man she dreaded marrying, she had a good job, and she was free to live her own life, but the taint of her dishonesty hung over her like a dark cloud, and she hoped that it would not be the downfall of her newfound happiness.

To cheer herself up, Charlotte began to hum as she organized Duncan's desk. She could not know what the future might hold, but she was determined to focus on the

present and take one day at a time. Her efforts were successful, and, within moments, she was humming loudly. So loudly, in fact, that the sharp rap on Duncan's study door startled her, and she dropped a stack of papers on the floor. She glanced up and saw a stern-looking woman standing in the doorway. Charlotte flushed, too surprised to say anything.

The woman frowned.

“Where is my son?” she asked.

Charlotte blinked, confused.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked weakly.

The woman’s scowl deepened.

“You stand in my son’s office, and yet you do not know where he is?” she asked.

Charlotte took a shaky breath, trying to steady her racing heart. She gave the woman a small smile.

“Forgive me, my lady,” she said with a curtsy. “I did not recognize you as Lord Willeton’s mother.”

The woman huffed, brushing a strand of straight black hair from her eerily pale face.

“My name is Helena Lancaster, not “Lord Willeton’s mother”, she said coldly. “And I will see my son. Now.”

Charlotte clenched her teeth. The woman’s harsh attitude was making her blood

hot, but she knew she was in no position to lose her temper. Instead, she gave another curtsy and smiled.

“My apologies, my lady,” she said, cursing herself for the flush that the woman’s insolence brought to her cheeks. “Lord Willetton is away at the moment.”

The woman put her hands on her hips and glared at Charlotte.

“When is he expected to return?” she

asked.

Charlotte did her best to keep her smile in place. She clasped her hands behind her back to prevent herself from balling them into fists.

“He should return later this evening,” she said. “May I take a message for you?”

Helena narrowed her eyes, surveying Charlotte with unabashed, disdainful scrutiny.

“How do you know so much about my son’s business, when I knew nothing of this trip?” she asked. “Precisely who are you?”

Charlotte’s blood froze. It had proven difficult enough to lie to Duncan, and he was very gentle and understanding. This woman could be the undoing of everything she had worked so hard to attain, for both her and Ruth. It angered her that the woman felt entitled to know so much about her son’s affairs and those of a complete stranger.

However, Charlotte knew that evading the

woman's inquiry could prove more damning than anything she said.

She squared her shoulders and met the woman's gaze firmly.

“My name is Christine Becker,” she said slowly, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt. “Lord Willetton has hired me to help him with some of his business affairs.”

Helena stared at her, her expression cold and calculating.

“Your name is unfamiliar to me,” she said. “How did you meet my son?”

Charlotte’s heart stopped. She had never considered creating a story about how she and Ruth had met Duncan. She could hardly tell her the truth, but she was at a complete loss for an explanation.

“Miss Becker?” a soft voice called from the doorway.

Charlotte looked up, nearly fainting with relief when she saw Ruth standing there.

“Yes, Ruthie?” she asked.

“I need your assistance downstairs in the library, if you have a moment,” she said, looking back and forth between the pale, dark-haired woman and Charlotte.

“Of course, Ruthie,” she said, confidence returning to her voice. “I will be there directly.”

Helena put her hands on her hips,
looking angrier than before.

“Well,” she huffed. “I had no idea my son
was so busy hiring extra help.”

Instead of replying, Charlotte brushed
past the woman and headed for the door.
When she reached it, she turned on her heels,
grateful that her face was set more firmly than
she felt.

“Please, excuse me,” she said. “I must return to my duties. I will be sure to let Lord Willeton know that you came seeking him.”

Without waiting for a response, Charlotte walked out of the room and followed Ruth to the library.

Once inside, Ruth closed the door behind them. She led Charlotte to the open window on the other side of the room and took her hands.

“Thank you, Ruth,” Charlotte said,
squeezing her maid’s hands.

“Who was that?” Ruth asked, keeping her
voice low.

Charlotte frowned.

“Lord Willeton’s mother, it would seem,”
she said.

“What happened?” Ruth asked, her face
slowly losing color.

Charlotte briefly explained her encounter with the cold woman, and Ruth listened with growing horror.

“You do not think that she suspects something, do you?” Ruth asked.

Charlotte shook her head.

“She could not possibly,” she said. “She only just saw us today, but she is a rather harsh and severe woman, and she did not seem pleased that we are here.”

Ruth shook her head slowly, still looking fearful.

“I am sure that she is just an overprotective mother,” Charlotte said, trying to reassure Ruth.

At last Ruth nodded, and her face relaxed marginally.

“I am sure that you are right,” she said.

Charlotte smiled.

The two women exited the room.

Charlotte was relieved to hear a carriage pulling away from the house, but she tiptoed up the stairs, nonetheless.

Sure enough, when she reached the study door, the woman was gone. She breathed a sigh of relief and quickly rushed into the room to pick up the stack of papers she had dropped and finish organizing the rest of the paperwork on the desk. However, she could

not help worrying that Helena would create trouble for her and Ruth. All they could do was hope that Helena Lancaster would soon forget all about them, and that they would never see her again.

Chapter 8

The days that Duncan spent away from the house seemed to drag. He had never found it so difficult to concentrate on his business dealings, especially ones that were important enough to require him to be gone from home for more than a few hours.

His thoughts revolved around Christine, and it was a miracle that he managed to complete the meetings and gain the new partnerships he had been seeking. When, at last, all business was completed, he made

hasty work of the handshakes and partings before rushing out of the gentleman's club to board his waiting coach.

Duncan found himself quite anxious on the carriage ride home that evening. Time seemed to pass at half speed as he anticipated seeing Christine. He had missed her a great deal more than he had expected, even though he had only been gone for a couple of days. There was something about her that drew him to her, and he very much looked forward to seeing her again.

Duncan hardly waited for the coach to come to a complete stop before he disembarked. He leapt from the carriage and rushed to the front door, straightening his jacket. He opened the door, and, without waiting for the butler to greet him, made his way into his study.

To his dismay, Christine was not inside. He looked at his watch and saw that she would be preparing to leave for her room at the inn within the next half hour. He raced

back down the stairs, nearly running into her, as he pushed off the last stair and turned to start down the hallway.

“Oh,” he said, trying to hide his surprise.

“Please, forgive me, Miss Becker.”

Christine smiled and blushed.

“Not at all, my lord,” she said. “How was your trip? I hope all went well.”

Duncan waved his hand. He was too

thrilled to see her to spend the time they had left that evening discussing such trivialities.

“It went quite well, thank you,” he said.

“How were things here?”

Christine nodded.

“I separated your more recent mail from the rest, and all the mail in general from the rest of your paperwork. I also put some books that were lying around your office back on the shelves. I hope you do not mind.”

Duncan laughed.

“Quite the contrary, Miss Becker,” he said. “I appreciate your work a great deal.”

Christine blushed. Then, she gasped softly.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” she said. “Your mother came looking for you.”

Duncan’s face fell at once. He knew how

cold and severe his mother could be, and he hoped that she had not been too harsh with Christine.

“Did she?” he asked. “Did she mention why she was seeking me?”

Christine shook her head, her face paling.

“She made it perfectly clear that she had no desire to convey her message through me. She said that she would return soon to speak with you personally.”

Duncan tightened his jaw, cursing himself for having forgotten to tell his mother that he would be away on business.

“I do hope that she was not too troublesome,” he said.

Christine gave him a small smile, but she averted her gaze. Duncan felt his anger rise. Her reaction told him all he needed to know, and he vowed to speak with his mother about coming into his home and intimidating his

employees. Especially Christine.

“I suppose she was just surprised to see a new face when she arrived,” Christine said, her voice sounding anything but certain. Duncan’s heart jumped as he watched her attempt to defend his mother.

“She has a certain cold way with people,” he said. “Please, do not take her behavior personally.”

Christine smiled, more genuinely this

time.

“I have braved far worse, my lord,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

Duncan smiled, thinking again of the day they met.

“I suppose you have,” he said. The chiming of the clock reminded him that Christine’s duties were concluded for the day, and his heart sank. He thought quickly.

“Before you leave,” he said. “Won’t you join me for tea?”

To Duncan’s pleasant surprise, Christine brightened.

“I would love to,” she said.

Duncan led the way into the drawing room and called for one of the servants to fetch some tea and cakes.

“Well,” Duncan said. “How do you like

your work so far?”

Christine beamed.

“I love it, my lord,” she said. “It is good to keep myself busy, and you are a most gracious and courteous employer.”

Duncan laughed.

“I am glad to hear it,” he said. “I trust that you will let me know if there is ever anything else I can do to keep things running

smoothly for you?”

Christine shook her head.

“You have already done so much, for both Ruthie and me,” she said. “I cannot think of a single thing we could possibly need.”

Duncan shrugged.

“I want to ensure that my employees have everything they need at all times,” he said. “Their happiness and satisfaction are a

priority for me.” He looked at Christine with a meaningful expression. “I want you all to be able to trust me, with anything. No matter what.”

Christine’s flush returned, and she looked down at her hands.

“You are most gracious,” she repeated. “I will keep that in mind.”

Duncan nodded, satisfied.

“Very good,” he said.

The tea and cakes arrived, and they partook of them in silence for a few moments.

“Thank you very much for inviting me for tea, my lord,” she said.

Duncan put down his cup of tea and looked at Christine.

“I must confess that I did not invite you to tea merely to be polite,” he said.

Christine's eyes widened, and she hastily put down her own cup.

“Oh?” she asked. Duncan wondered at the worry that had begun to crease her face.

“I also asked you to join me this evening because I have another invitation that I would like to extend to you,” he said, feeling his own cheeks warm.

Christine blinked, her face relaxing and

her eyes growing curious.

“Another invitation?” she asked. “I do not understand. What more could you wish to offer, after you have already been more than generous?”

Duncan smiled. Her humble nature impressed him every bit as much as her work ethic.

“An invitation of a social nature,” he said.

Christine looked at him with intrigue and something else that Duncan could not quite pinpoint.

“There is a ball in about a week. Before I answer the invitation, I wanted to ask you if you would attend with me.”

Christine gasped and put her hand over her mouth.

“A ball?” she asked. “Who is hosting it?”

Duncan looked at Christine, puzzled.

“I thought you had no friends in the ton,”
he said.

Christine picked up her cup and took a
sip of her tea. Duncan suspected that it was to
avoid his gaze.

“More like acquaintances,” she said. “I
met many people through my father, but I
cannot say that I was particularly close to any

of them.”

Duncan nodded, remembering that her father was a baron. He considered her question for a moment.

“I cannot recall who sent the invitation at the moment,” he admitted, embarrassed. He often received so many invitations at once that he could not keep the particulars straight. That would be part of Christine’s job, helping him to keep those affairs organized. “I can fetch the invitation, if you like.”

Christine shook her head.

“I was just curious as to whether it was a name I recognized,” she said quietly.

“Truthfully, it matters little. I am afraid that I must respectfully decline your invitation.”

Duncan’s heart sank. He wanted very much to spend more time with Christine outside of her workday.

“I know that ton balls can be a bit stiff,”

he said quickly, “but attending with someone whose company you enjoy can make them bearable. Often, even enjoyable.”

Christine looked at him and smiled, the blush returning to her cheeks.

“The Duke of Willeton thinks balls are stiff?” she asked, her voice carrying a teasing lilt.

Duncan laughed, enjoying the change in her mood.

“Most often, yes,” he said. “Please, do not tell anyone.”

Christine nodded knowingly, her eyes sparkling.

“Your secret is safe with me, my lord,” she said.

Duncan chuckled again.

“Have you ever attended one?” he asked.

Christine nodded.

“I attended one,” she said. She seemed to slip into deep thought for a moment. “You are right. It was not much fun.”

Duncan gave her his most charming smile.

“You should attend this one with me,” he said. “I am sure that it would not be so boring for you.”

Christine gave him a small smile.

“I have no doubt that you would be wonderful company, my lord,” she said. “I am afraid, however, that I do not belong at any balls.”

Duncan frowned. Did she really think so little of herself, just because of her father’s title? Or had her father made her feel that way? More than ever, Duncan wanted to know more about Christine, but he did not wish to press her further just then.

“I believe that you have every right to attend a ball,” he said. “You most certainly do if you have been formally invited.”

“I have not been formally invited,” she said, her flush deepening.

Duncan smiled sadly. Something was making her uncomfortable, and he desperately wished that he knew what it was.

“What do you think it is that I am

doing?” he asked, his voice reassuring. “I am extending you a formal invitation, as a guest who received an invitation and permission to bring someone to accompany me if I wish.”

Realization dawned on Christine’s face, and she looked at him with widened eyes.

“My lord, that is very kind of you, indeed,” she said. “But I really have no place in high society, and certainly not at this ball.” She rose quickly and gathered her coat. “I am sorry, but I really must go. Ruthie will be

waiting for me.”

Before he could say anything else, Christine quickly excused herself and rushed from the room. Despite how desperately he wanted to chase after her, he did not want to embarrass or upset her any further. He did not understand her hesitance, nor her instance on not belonging at society events. She was certainly beautiful enough, and he would gladly defend her to anyone who had anything to say about her being a professional woman.

With great disappointment, Duncan decided that he would not press the issue with her further. If she did not wish to attend the ball, he would not keep asking her, but he could not bring himself to give up. The more time he spent with Christine, the more time he wanted to spend with her. He vowed he would not give up his pursuit until she agreed to spend time with him outside of their work arrangement.

Chapter 9

Charlotte found herself warming more to Duncan every day, and she knew that he was beginning to like her, too. She had spent a great deal of time thinking about his invitation to the ball, and she regretted having to turn him down. The truth was, she would have relished attending a ball with him. However, with her identity still secret, and with the likelihood that she would encounter someone who knew her, it was a risk she could not take. Especially since she had still been unable to tell Duncan who she really was.

As each day passed, however, she thought more seriously about explaining everything to Duncan. Apart from Ruth, she had not met anyone she trusted as much as him in many years, and, if she were honest with herself, keeping such a big secret was weighing terribly on her. She had trouble sleeping, her appetite was beginning to suffer, and she knew it would not be long before Duncan noticed and asked questions.

She desperately wanted to tell him,

especially since he had been making such an effort to be better acquainted with her. Just because she had initially lied to him did not mean that she had to spin a large web of stories to go along with it. False memories, nonexistent relationships, and childhood experiences that were not hers did not have to further complicate her situation. But his growing interest was slowly chipping away at her resolve to keep her secret.

Only her fear stopped her each time she considered confiding the truth to him. He was

kind to her as things were, and she believed that there was a mutual attraction forming between them. What if that changed? What if he was so upset with her for lying to him that he sent her away? What if he took her back to her father?

If Duncan did that, her father would certainly see to it that she boarded a ship to France, even if he had to send a personal escort to ensure that she was delivered directly to the Comte. Despite her troubled conscience and growing desire to tell Duncan

everything, she could not risk that. No, she knew that she must keep the secret a little while longer. She would wait until the time was right to tell him.

* * *

Helena Lancaster quickly became a daily fixture in Charlotte's life. It seemed that she was almost always there when Charlotte arrived for work, and it was rare that the cruel woman left before Charlotte did. Charlotte learned quickly to avoid her. For reasons

completely unknown, Helena always looked at her with a sneer or glare.

One day, however, Charlotte was startled to find Helena waiting for her when she entered Duncan's study. Duncan had left early that morning for a business meeting and was not scheduled to return until midafternoon. Charlotte did her best to hide her surprise and put on her most pleasant smile.

“Good morning, my lady,” she said.

Helena scowled at her.

“Where is my son?” she asked. “Did he go out of town again and once more neglect to tell me?”

Charlotte squared her shoulders. She was determined not to let the woman intimidate her.

“He is at a meeting,” she said curtly. “It should only be a few hours more. Then he will be returning home.”

“Very well,” Helena said, taking a seat behind Duncan’s desk. “I will wait here for him.”

Charlotte tightened her jaw.

“Forgive me, my lady,” she said, trying to swallow her anger, “but I am tasked with cleaning and organizing the study for Lord Willetton. If you would like, I can have the servants bring you tea in the drawing room, and you can wait for him there.”

Helena gave a dry cackle.

“Perhaps if you did your job properly, you would not need to tidy Duncan’s study every single day,” she said. “I shall wait for my son to return wherever I wish. This is his house, not yours.”

Charlotte put her hands together in front of her.

“You are correct,” she said. “This is,

indeed, Lord Willeton's house."

"I am his mother," Helena hissed. "And you are an impudent little servant girl who has no business presuming to tell me what to do. You certainly have no business knowing so much about Duncan's business affairs."

"To keep things like my appointments and paperwork in order, she must know about my meetings and business trips, Mother," Duncan's voice drifted in from the study doorway.

Charlotte felt faint with relief. Helena, however, appeared irate. Rather than address her son, she looked at Christine with a snide expression.

“I thought you said he was in his meeting until this afternoon,” she snapped.

Duncan slowly entered the room, moving to stand beside Charlotte, but never taking his eyes off his mother.

“We finished early,” he said, offering nothing else in the way of an explanation.

“What, precisely, is going on here?”

Helena sniffed.

“I was just ensuring that your little servant here understands her place,” she said, glaring hatefully at Charlotte.

Duncan turned his back on his mother to look at Charlotte.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

Charlotte gave him her best smile, still feeling the anger flushing her cheeks.

“Yes,” she said. “I am alright.”

Helena gave a dry laugh.

“Your mother is here to see you,” she said. “Yet you come in to check on a maid?”

Duncan turned quickly and approached

his mother.

“She is no maid,” he said, his voice low and menacing. “She is my personal assistant, and you have no right to speak to her in such a fashion.”

“She has no right to be so insubordinate,” Helena retorted.

Duncan smirked at his mother.

“She is not at all insubordinate, Mother,”

he said. “Indeed, she goes above and beyond all that I ask of her.”

Helena chuckled.

“Yes,” she said, giving Charlotte a cold, knowing look. “I imagine she does.”

Duncan put his hands behind his back, balling them into fists. He stepped closer still to his mother, his eyes smoldering.

“I do not like what you are implying.

Rest assured it is out of line,” he said. “Miss Becker is a model employee, and I am sure that anything she said to you was the direct result of your behavior towards her.”

“She presumed to tell me that I could not await your return in your study,” Helena said, lifting her head, as though she believed that explained everything.

Duncan nodded.

“She was right to say so,” he said. “It is

part of her job to tidy up in here, and she cannot do that if the study is occupied.”

“Why?” Helena asked snidely. “Is she afraid that I will catch her shirking her duties?”

Charlotte moved her gaze to the floor, not out of shame, but out of rage. How dare this woman say such things to and about her? It was not Charlotte’s true social status that upset her about Helena’s heinous behavior and insulting words.

It was that the woman would dare to speak to anyone at all in such a manner. She even seemed content to speak to her son in the same way, and Charlotte found that upset her even more than the way Helena was treating her. She wanted to speak on her own behalf, so that Duncan would not incur more of his mother's cruelty, but she remained silent. She doubted that her interference would do anything other than worsen the situation, and she did not want to risk upsetting Duncan.

“Mother,” Duncan said, his teeth beginning to clench. “Miss Becker is an employee. A highly skilled and valued one. Furthermore, she is my employee, not yours. She is certainly not a slave that you can treat in this way. I demand that you stop at once.”

Helena huffed.

“You will not tell me what I will and will not do,” she said. “I am your mother.”

“And this is my home,” Duncan retorted.

“And in my home, you will respect my wishes.”

“Then I would advise you to teach your employees some respect,” Helena hissed.

“If that is all, Mother, I am afraid that I must ask you to excuse me,” he said. “I have some paperwork that I must finish before tomorrow morning.”

Helena’s eyes widened.

“You are asking me to leave?” she asked, incredulous.

Duncan began to usher her toward the study door.

“We will speak again tomorrow, I am sure,” he said. “For now, I must get back to work.”

Helena glared back and forth between Charlotte and Duncan. At last, with a final huff, she stormed off down the hall. When the

front door closed loudly, Charlotte knew the awful woman had gone. Duncan turned back to Charlotte, his brows furrowed deeply.

“Are you alright?” he repeated.

Charlotte pushed back her anger and gave him a reassuring smile.

“Yes, my lord,” she said. “I am fine.”

Duncan shook his head and ran his hand through his beautiful blond hair.

“I do apologize,” he said. “Though I do not know if any apology I could ever give would make amends for my mother’s conduct.”

Charlotte smiled again, looking Duncan in the eyes.

“Thank you for defending me,” she said.

Duncan looked at Charlotte, smiling at last.

“You deserved to be defended,” he said.

“My mother far overstepped her boundaries.

She must realize that she cannot speak to people in that way.”

Charlotte nodded.

“I do not wish to be a source of discontent between you and your mother,” she said. “It really is alright. I can simply ignore and avoid her from now on.”

Duncan shook his head emphatically.

“I will not have my employees hiding or feeling uncomfortable in my home,” he said.

“Especially you.”

Charlotte’s heart began to pound.

Duncan seemed to sense that he had said something that made an impression, and smiled.

“You do not deserve to be spoken to that

way by my mother,” he said. “Nor do any of my other employees. She has no right to come in here and behave that way.” Duncan took a step toward Charlotte and smiled warmly. “Do not worry,” he said. “I will ensure that she never troubles you again.

Unfortunately, however, things only got worse with Helena Lancaster. She rarely spoke to Charlotte in Duncan’s presence, but when Duncan was not there, she was venomous towards her. One afternoon she brushed past Charlotte while she was carrying a tray with

empty teacups to the kitchen. Charlotte avoided her gaze and tried to quickly move past the woman, but at the last moment, Helena stepped in her path, causing the tray to hit the tall, severe woman and the cups to crash to the floor and shatter. Helena smirked.

“Clumsy fool,” she murmured. “You best clean that up.”

Charlotte continued to ignore the woman, moving to get what she needed to clean up the shattered china. She knew that

she would have to tell Duncan what had happened, but she dreaded it. She did not wish to upset him with further news of his mother's terrible behavior, and she did not want Helena to become even worse. With a sigh, Charlotte got to work cleaning up the porcelain shards.

Chapter 10

“Good morning, Duncan,” his mother said.

Duncan shuddered. The false pleasantness in her voice did nothing to mask its underlying bitterness. As expected, she arrived at about the same time Christine would have, had she been coming in that day. Duncan had cleared his schedule just in case she appeared. He was determined to speak to his mother without interruption so that she would be forced to listen.

“We must speak, Mother,” he said.

Helena looked around.

“Where is your servant girl?” she asked.

“She can bring us some tea.”

Duncan clenched his jaw, ignoring his mother’s question.

“Come into the study with me,” he said.

Helena looked flustered at Duncan's assertiveness, but she followed him into the study. Once inside, Duncan closed the door behind them. He gestured wordlessly for his mother to sit, while he opted to stand beside his desk. He was too angry to sit, and he wanted his mother to know he was serious about what he was about to say.

“Is your little employee late for work today?” Helena asked, her eyes gleaming with smugness.

“I gave her the day off, Mother,” Duncan said. “Though I hardly see how that is any of your concern.”

Helena cackled.

“Did she at last become too troublesome for you?” she asked.

Duncan glared at his mother.

“We are not here to discuss Miss Becker,” he said, his voice low and angry. “We are here

to discuss your behavior.”

Helena’s eyes widened.

“My behavior?” she echoed. “What is it that I have done?”

Duncan resisted the urge to slam his hand down on his desk.

“You know very well what it is that you are doing,” he said.

Helena pretended to study one of her gloved hands.

“I am sure I have no idea what you are talking about,” she said.

“Mother, don’t,” Duncan said. “You cannot keep coming here and treating my workers any way you please.”

Helena laughed.

“Darling, you are getting too worked up

over mere servants,” she said. “Especially that silly little fool, Miss Beckner. Poor thing doesn’t even know what a proper wardrobe is.”

Duncan took a step toward his mother.

“Her name is Miss Becker,” he hissed.

“And I am certain you know that.”

Helena waved her hand dismissively, but Duncan would not be deterred.

“You will cease tormenting her, effective immediately,” he continued.

Helena laughed.

“And if I do not?” she challenged.

Duncan smirked.

“Then you will no longer be welcome in my home,” he said.

Helena’s eyes grew wide.

“You will not ban me from your home,” she said. “I am an integral part of many of your business dealings.”

Duncan shook his head.

“Your name is on the assets that belonged to Father,” he said, “but you have no direct dealings in any of my business ventures.”

Helena rose from her seat, nearly

toppling it over.

“I am your mother,” she said. “Your affairs involve me every bit as much as they do you.”

Duncan glared at his mother again.

“No, they do not,” he said. “And I will thank you to stop trying to get so involved with them. My ventures are mine alone, and you have no right to inject yourself into them.”

Helena put her hands on her hips.

“You dare speak to me the way you should be speaking to that little servant girl of yours?” she asked.

Duncan shrugged.

“It would seem that you are far less deserving of my respect at the moment than she is,” he said.

Helena strode toward her son, stopping inches from his face.

“You will never again say such things to me,” she hissed. Then she took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. “I can see that you are very cross today. I will return tomorrow and hope to see that your disposition has improved.”

Duncan shook his head again.

“That is another thing,” he said. “You

will stop coming by every single day. Two days per week is more than sufficient for you and me to discuss the business we have together.”

Helena’s rage returned.

“I will come here any time I wish,” she said, her voice rising.

Duncan nodded.

“I cannot stop you from making the trip

here,” he said. “But I can deny you entry, except on the days I have agreed to your visit.”

Helena trembled, her pale cheeks flushed. It was clear that there were many more things she wished to say. After a tense moment, however, she simply turned on her heel and hurried toward the door. Before she left the room, she glanced at Duncan over her shoulder.

“This is not over, Duncan,” she said, her

voice menacing and sharp. Then she stormed out of the front door.

Duncan waited until he heard a departing carriage before letting out a sigh. His mother had never been known for her kindness, but it seemed that she was much crueler and colder of late than he had ever known her to be.

Duncan was not sure what it all meant, but he knew that his mother was fast becoming a source of great trouble. He felt justified in what he had said to her, and he intended to stick to it.

However, his mother had given Duncan an idea. It had not occurred to him previously, but part of Christine's reluctance to attend the ball with him could well be, at least in part, because of her inadequate wardrobe. If, however, she had a few nice dresses, she might feel more confident, and be more willing to attend social events with him.

He called his butler and arranged for two servants to go into town and buy Christine an assortment of dresses. He regretted that he

had to do this task without having a dressmaker measure her, but he was worried that, if she knew in advance what he had planned, she would not only reject his offer, but she would storm away, her pride wounded. He would just have to hope he guessed the right sizes.

The day the dresses arrived, Christine was busying herself in his study, as usual. He took the dresses gently and steeled himself. He knew that she could still reject his offer, but he hoped that she would accept them as the

gift they were, not an act of charity.

The door to his study was wide open. He stepped inside and gently cleared his throat. Christine looked up from the stack of papers she was sorting and smiled.

“Yes, my lord?” she asked. She approached him, eyeing the boxes with mild curiosity. “Would you like me to put these away for you?”

Duncan smiled. Her eagerness to help

never ceased to amaze and inspire him.

“Actually,” he said. “These are for you.”

Christine furrowed her brow, and all at once, Duncan wanted nothing more than to kiss the wrinkle that formed between her eyebrows.

“For me?” she asked. “From whom?”

“From me,” he said. “You have been going above and beyond what I have required

of you, and I felt that you deserved a proper thank you for your hard work.”

She looked at the boxes and her cheeks flushed. She seemed to be thinking of a proper response, and, once more, Duncan hoped that she would accept the gifts, rather than be horrified by them.

At last, she gently reached for the boxes.

“You are very kind, my lord,” she said. “I shall put these away until I am finished with

work today.”

Duncan smiled again. Her selflessness was incredible, and he admired her for it.

“It would mean a great deal to me if you opened them now,” he encouraged.

Christine blinked, confused. However, she slowly put the boxes down on an empty chair and complied. She removed the lid to the top box and gasped.

“Oh, my,” she whispered. “This is beautiful.”

*No, Duncan thought. You are beautiful.
Those are just piles of cloth and stitching.*

“I am glad you like it,” he said aloud.

He held his breath as she opened the other two dress boxes, gasping and blushing more with each one. He said a silent prayer that she would not be angry with him or feel that he had overstepped his bounds.

At last, she looked up and smiled. Her eyes were shining with tears, and Duncan released the breath he had been holding.

“You are far too kind to me, my lord,” she whispered. “I do not feel that simply saying thank you is adequate.”

Duncan seized his opportunity.

“Your appreciation is evident,” he said.

“And I am thrilled that you love them.

However, perhaps you will consider accepting an invitation, in place of your verbal thanks.”

Christine’s eyes widened, and the flush in her cheeks deepened.

“My lord,” she said. “I do not mean any disrespect, but I still believe that I have no place at a ton ball.”

Duncan smiled warmly.

“I understand,” he said. “And, although I

disagree with you, that is not the invitation I wish to extend to you now.”

Curiosity once more dominated Christine’s features. She tilted her head, a small smile on her face.

“Very well,” she said. “What is this invitation?”

Duncan took a deep breath, thrilled that Christine was willing to hear his request.

“I intend to attend the theater this weekend,” he said. “I would be delighted if you would accompany me.”

Duncan braced himself, remembering how she had fled from him the last time he asked her to attend an event with him. Instead of flushing or running away, however, Christine looked at him thoughtfully.

“I did not realize that you enjoyed the theater,” she said, looking intrigued.

Duncan smiled shyly.

“It is something of a guilty pleasure,” he said.

Christine laughed. She looked down at the dresses in her hands. Duncan’s heart was racing. Was she about to accept his invitation? He forced himself not to press her as he eagerly awaited her answer.

She looked up at him at last, her expression a bit impish.

“Thank you very much, my lord,” she said. “Both for the dresses, and for your kind invitation. I am sure that a night at the theater would be lovely.”

Duncan’s heart was in his throat.

“Does that mean that you will attend with me?” he asked.

Christine gave him a shy smile of her own.

“I shall consider it,” she said.

Duncan could hardly believe it. While it was not a direct acceptance, it was certainly not a concrete rejection. Even her consideration of accepting the invitation gave him hope. Perhaps, at last, she was beginning to trust him.

“Take all the time you need,” Duncan said, unable to keep from grinning broadly.

“The invitation has been extended, and it will

not expire.”

“Unless I wait until after Sunday to answer, correct?” she teased.

Both Duncan and Christine laughed, and he felt his heart filling with joy at the sight of her beaming expression. He wondered if she was aware of the effect she had on him.

Chapter 11

Charlotte tried to avoid Ruth's eyes on the carriage ride back to the inn, despite the three large boxes resting atop her lap and Ruth's intensely curious expression. Through a sideways glance, Charlotte could see that curious was hardly the word. Ruth was practically trembling with excitement and unasked questions. Finally, Charlotte could stand her gaze no longer.

“What is it, Ruth?” she asked, trying to make her voice sound as innocent as she could

manage.

Ruth leaned toward her, her eyes wide.

“You sit there with a blush on your cheeks and three boxes in your lap, and you wonder what I want to know?” she asked.

Charlotte giggled.

“Perhaps I was wondering why you are so concerned about it?” she said.

Ruth gasped.

“Surely, you do not intend not to tell me what all this is about,” she said.

“Of course, I intend to tell you,” Charlotte said. “I just wanted to get my thoughts together before I did.”

Ruth sighed.

“Well, since we are talking about it now, you might as well tell me,” Ruth said, crossing

her arms.

Charlotte laughed, then recounted the tale of Duncan giving her the dresses and inviting her to the play. Ruth listened, her eyes growing wider and dreamier with each word. When Charlotte finished speaking, Ruth took her hands and shook them gently.

“Why on earth did you not accept his invitation to the play?” Ruth asked.

Charlotte sighed, having asked herself

that very question.

“Because I am not Christine Becker,
daughter of a baron. I am Charlotte Hackney,
daughter of the Earl of Devon.”

“So?” Ruth pressed. “He is inviting you,
just by another name.”

Charlotte shook her head.

“Anyone who knows my true identity
could see us,” she said. “What would I do

then?”

“Do you have feelings for him?” Ruth asked, as though Charlotte had not spoken. Charlotte opened her mouth to answer her maid, but something occurred to her that she had not realized before. She was indeed developing feelings for Duncan, beyond finding him kind and handsome, or an especially pleasant employer. Charlotte shook her head firmly.

“It hardly matters if I do, Ruth,” she said.

“I cannot be in love with a man who believes me to be someone else.”

Ruth gestured to the boxes in her lap.

“It would appear that he already has strong feelings for you,” she said.

Charlotte looked at the boxes as if seeing them for the first time. Could that be the real reason he bought her these dresses? She sighed.

“Then that would be all the more reason not to raise my hopes,” she said. “Or his.”

Ruth stared at her, bewildered.

“What do you mean?” she asked.

Charlotte smiled sadly.

“Do you really not see?” she asked. “I cannot possibly let him get close to me under this pretense. It is wrong, and it would surely lead to him despising me.”

Ruth shook her head.

“I do not think that you are giving him a fair chance,” she said. “He is a good, kind man. After all, he did not have us arrested when we committed an actual crime.”

Charlotte nodded.

“That is precisely my point,” she said.

“He was sweet and gallant enough to take us in, rather than send us to jail. And how did I

repay him? With lies and deceit.”

Ruth smiled at her, both sympathetically and knowingly.

“Your feelings for him are clearly real,” she said. “Perhaps that is something you should be honest about from the beginning, starting with accepting his invitation to the play.”

Charlotte stared at Ruth, amazed by her wisdom. She knew that Ruth had made a good

point, and she could not help but smile.

“I told him that I would consider it, and so I shall,” she said.

The next day, Charlotte went to work, dreading seeing Duncan. After her conversation with Ruth, she felt worse than ever about deceiving him. She steeled herself as she entered the study and exhaled in relief when he was not there. She walked over to his desk and found a note stating that he had gone to town for an unexpected business meeting,

and that he would not be returning until late that evening. She was as grateful for his absence as she was disappointed. This would give her the chance to be alone with her thoughts.

As she worked, she replayed her conversations and interactions with Duncan. She paid special attention to the day they met, and the moment he gave her the dresses. She had not been able to bring herself to admit it to Ruth, but she could see herself having a life with him. He was everything she had always

sought in a potential husband and everything she had not known she wanted. Still, no matter how much she cared for him, she knew that the only way to have a life with Duncan was if she told him the truth about her identity. It sounded like such a simple solution, but she knew there would be nothing easy about being honest with him, or about explaining why she had lied for so long.

She was stacking some papers together on the corner of Duncan's desk when she heard a familiar, grating voice drift up from

the entryway of the house. Her stomach lurched, and she raced from the study, hoping to busy herself in some hidden corner before she was spotted. She would have no such luck, however. As she looked around frantically for a room into which she could quickly duck, the voice called to her from the bottom of the stairs.

“Miss Becker?” Helena Lancaster called.

Charlotte stiffened, forcing herself to stand up straight and set her face in a solemn,

confident expression. She refused to give the woman the satisfaction of seeing her distress.

“Lord Willeton is out on business,” she said bluntly, pleased to hear that her voice was as cold and sharp as Helena’s. She was further pleased to see how taken aback the woman was at her tone. The reaction was brief, however, and Helena composed herself as she ascended the stairs.

“Yes, I am aware,” she said curtly. “I came to see you.”

It was Charlotte's turn to be bewildered. How did she know about Duncan's meeting, when it had been such a last-minute arrangement? And why had she come expressly seeking Charlotte?

"I beg your pardon?" Charlotte asked dumbly.

Helena sighed.

"I came," she said slowly, "to see you."

Charlotte's cheeks flushed with anger.

She was no child, and Helena speaking to her as though she was infuriated her.

“I understood what you said, my lady,”

Charlotte snapped. “I just do not understand why you wish to see me specifically.”

Helena looked at her, the expression of feigned innocence on her face making it look like a frightening theater mask.

“Well,” she said, as though it should have been obvious. “My son thinks so highly of you that I want to know you better.”

Charlotte believed none of what the woman was saying, of course, but she knew that confronting Helena Lancaster was the last thing she should do. So, rather than respond to Helena’s remark, she remained silent, staring stoically at the woman who was slowly ascending the stairs. Her movements and sly smile reminded Charlotte of a wolf closing in on its prey.

“Relax, darling,” Helena said, her voice dripping with unnatural sweetness. “I only want to talk to you. There is no need to be so suspicious.”

The woman drew out her last word, and Charlotte’s blood ran cold. She forced a smile, knowing well that it could not look any more convincing than it felt.

“Would you prefer to talk in the library or drawing room?” she asked the woman. “I

could have one of the servants fetch some tea and cakes if you like.”

Helena waved her hand.

“No,” she said. “We will speak in Duncan’s study. Privately.”

Charlotte prayed that by some miracle, Duncan would return early from his meeting, as he had the first time Helena had cornered her. But, as she followed the woman into Duncan’s study, and Helena closed the door

behind them, Charlotte realized she would get no relief.

“Sit,” Helena said, sharply gesturing to the chairs in front of Duncan’s desk. Feeling as though she was not moving of her own accord, Charlotte complied weakly with Helena’s demand. She took a deep breath and clasped her hands tightly in her lap to keep them from trembling. She resolved to keep silent, saying nothing unless she was prompted to do so, in the hopes that this uncomfortable encounter would end quickly.

Helena folded her hands against her thin stomach and began pacing slowly.

“How did you meet my son?” Helena asked bluntly.

Charlotte felt her stomach turn. She cursed herself for still not having thought up a convincing reason for their acquaintance. She drew in a shaky breath, wishing vainly that her trembling would cease.

“I met him on the docks,” she said truthfully.

Helena sneered.

“I see,” she said. “You were planning a trip of some kind, then?”

Charlotte winced. She could not help wondering if Helena could know more about her than she let on. Charlotte felt herself shrink away from Helena’s intense gaze, but she forced herself to meet the woman’s eyes

and feign a confidence she certainly did not feel.

“Ruthie and I were simply enjoying the fresh sea air,” she said.

Helena stared at Charlotte, searching her face for any sign of dishonesty. Charlotte held her breath and kept perfectly still, afraid that any shift or movement would betray her guilt.

“So, you just happened to come across Duncan while you were out for your little

stroll?” Helena asked.

Charlotte blinked. What was Helena suggesting?

“As a matter of fact, yes,” Charlotte said.

Helena sniffed.

“You expect me to believe that you had no idea that my very wealthy son had ships in that particular area of the docks?” she asked.

Charlotte understood at once, and she felt weak with relief.

“How could I have known where Lord Willeton’s ships were?” Charlotte asked, beginning to feel more confident in the reason for this interrogation.

Instead of answering, Helena moved closer to her and leaned down so that her face was inches from Charlotte’s. The woman’s eyes were lit with fury, and her breath was hot and smelled of soured apples.

“You may have my son fooled, you silly girl,” she hissed, “but I can see through your lies. You do not have a baron for a father, and I am certain that you did not just accidentally happen upon Duncan.”

Charlotte paled. She could not tell if Helena was bluffing or if she genuinely did know something. In either case, Helena was far too close to figuring out that Charlotte was, indeed, lying, and she struggled to keep from panicking.

In one last effort to keep Helena from seeing how intimidated she was, Charlotte set her jaw and held up her head.

“I do not know what it is that you are implying,” she said firmly, “but I do not appreciate any of this. You have no right to question my integrity, and I do not have to tolerate such behavior. I am an employee, but I am not your employee, and I will not allow you to continue to treat me in this way.”

Before Helena could recover from her temporarily stunned state, Charlotte rose quickly from her chair and exited the study. Once she was out of Helena's sight, she raced toward the library, closing the door behind her as she entered. She leaned against the door, her heart racing at a wild pace and her breathing rapid and shallow. Even if Helena were only bluffing, her suspicions and prying questions could very well cause Charlotte's resolve to falter and lead her to expose herself. She loved working for Duncan, and she was growing fond of him, but his mother was

insufferable, and she had no idea what to do.

Still reeling from the intensity of Helena's

interrogation, Charlotte buried her face in her

hands and cried softly.

Chapter 12

“Miss Becker?” Duncan called from the doorway of the library.

It took her a moment to come to him, and he felt a little guilty for calling her away from her duties. In truth, however, he no longer cared whether she completed her work. She could sit and sip tea all day, and he would be just as thrilled with her presence.

She approached him, her cheeks flushed and her eyes wide.

“Yes, my lord?” she asked.

Duncan took in her face, forgetting the reason he had called her. There really wasn't a reason for calling her in the first place. He found himself looking for any excuse to talk to her. However, now that she was here, he knew he must think of something to ask.

“Do you like books?” he asked. He winced inwardly, cursing himself for being unable to think of no better reason to call for

her.

Christine looked at him, confused.

“I enjoy an occasional good read,” she said. “Why?”

Duncan flushed, flustered.

“I was going through some of my old books, and I was wondering if there were some that you might enjoy,” he said.

Christine visibly relaxed, and only then did Duncan see how tense and worried she had looked.

“Oh,” she said, smiling sheepishly. “That is very kind of you. I would love to look at some of your titles.”

Duncan put down the book he was holding and stepped closer to Christine.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

The flush returned to her cheeks, and she averted her gaze.

“Yes,” she said. “I am quite well, thank you.”

Duncan frowned.

“Is something troubling you?” he asked.

“Do you need anything?”

Christine shook her head, her smile still in place, but more strained.

“No, my lord,” she said quickly.

“Everything here is wonderful.”

Duncan opened his mouth to point out that she did not look like everything was wonderful, but he changed his mind. Perhaps she would soon begin to soften and tell him what was bothering her.

He smiled warmly and led her over to a stack of books. In truth, he had not sorted through any of them on that shelf, but he had

read nearly every book in the library, and he would not miss any that he chose to give to Christine.

“Here,” he said. “Take the rest of the afternoon and look through these. You are welcome to any that strike your fancy.”

Once more, Christine relaxed. She looked at him gratefully, and it tugged at his heart. Whatever was bothering her, his offer seemed to help. For the time being, he would allow himself to be satisfied with that small victory.

* * *

Throughout the rest of the week, Duncan enjoyed every second he got to spend speaking with Christine. However, he did his best to avoid the subject of going to the play. She was more tense than usual, and she seemed distant and lost in her thoughts. Duncan forced himself to resist the urge to coax her to tell him what was bothering her, as he feared that would only push her further away.

He had decided, however, that if she ever did decide to open up to him, he would do whatever it took to resolve her troubles. He cared very much for her, and it was difficult for him to see her in such distress.

The day before the play, however, Duncan noticed that Christine was acting much more like her usual self. She seemed happier, and he even caught her humming a few times throughout the day. By the time the workday was over, Duncan decided that he had to speak with Christine. He did not wish

to pry, but he was curious to know what had her in such high spirits.

“Good afternoon, my lord,” Christine said, as he approached her in the library.

“Good afternoon, Miss Becker,” he said, bowing in an exaggerated fashion. To his delight, Christine giggled.

“You certainly seem to be in a happy mood,” she said, looking at him with sparkling eyes.

Duncan smiled.

“That is odd,” he said. “For I was about to say the same thing to you.”

Christine blushed and looked away shyly.

“Well,” she said. “I should imagine that any young lady would be thrilled about attending a play with a duke tomorrow evening.”

Duncan looked at her quizzically for a moment. Then the realization of what she had said sank in, and he beamed.

“Does that mean that you are accepting my invitation?” he asked, his heart pounding.

Christine laughed again.

“It does, indeed,” she said. “That is, of course, if the invitation still stands?”

Duncan chuckled and moved to

Christine's side, barely containing the urge to take her hands in his.

“Of course, it still stands,” he said. “I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you have agreed to attend. I very much look forward to showing you what it is like to enjoy the luxuries of the ton.”

Christine blushed again.

“I am very much looking forward to it, as well, my lord,” she said.

“And,” Duncan continued, unable to contain his excitement. “It would be an honor if Ruthie could join us, both as your chaperone and your friend. If, that is, she would be interested in attending.”

Christine clasped her hands at her chest and looked at Duncan. The joy on her face warmed Duncan’s heart, which began to pound in his chest.

“You are very kind,” she said. “I know

that she would be thrilled to join us.”

Duncan nodded, elated at the change in his luck with Christine.

“Very good,” he said. “The two of you may freshen up here after you are finished working if you like, and we will leave as soon as you are both ready.”

Christine frowned.

“But our things are at the inn,” she said.

“We will have nothing to wear.”

Duncan thought for a moment.

“Well, if you like, I could send someone to pick up some of your things for you,” he said.

Christine’s face lit up, and she nodded eagerly.

“That sounds wonderful, my lord,” she said.

Duncan cleared his schedule of all work obligations for the following day. He could think of nothing else but escorting Christine to the theater that night. He even gave his house staff strict instructions not to allow his mother to set foot in the house, should she decide to come by. He did not understand why his mother disliked Christine so much, and he did not care to find out.

Truthfully, his mother had not liked any of the women he had met at various social

events, despite seeming interested in seeing him take a wife. Duncan had never felt a strong connection with any of the women he had met, but he had danced and dined with a few who were interesting, beautiful, and intelligent, and he would have liked the opportunity to know them better. However, it seemed that his mother had an uncanny ability to scare away any woman in whom he showed the remotest interest. He had tried to discuss it with her, but she would simply brush him off, saying that they were not good enough for him, and leave it at that. Christine,

however, was different. The last thing he wanted was for his mother to scare her away. He did feel a strong connection with Christine, and he would do anything to keep her in his life.

That evening, Duncan dressed early and paced the floor at the base of the stairs, as the two women dressed for the play. Their dresses had been placed in a spare room hours ago, and he hoped that the servant had chosen dresses that pleased the women. Deep down, Duncan feared that Christine would change

her mind and decide that she did not wish to go with him after all. However, after half an hour of pacing and watch checking, the women appeared at the top of the stairs.

Duncan stared as Christine and Ruthie descended. Even though Duncan had bought the dresses for Christine, he could have never imagined how beautiful she would look in them. Her loveliness could easily rival that of a faerie, and his heart raced erratically. His voice failed him as he looked at her, returning only once she put her hand on his arm.

“Miss Becker,” he said, smiling at her in awe. “You look astonishing.”

Christine blushed and beamed up at him.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said. “You look rather handsome yourself.”

Duncan felt his own cheeks begin to grow warm. He resisted, with a great deal of difficulty, the urge to stroke her cheek.

Instead, he turned his attention to Ruthie. He

did not wish to make her feel left out.

“And you, Ruthie,” he said with a bow.

“You look positively lovely.”

Ruthie flushed deeply and hid a smile behind her hand.

“You are very kind, my lord,” she said softly.

Duncan smiled warmly at her. Then, he offered his arms to both women.

“Are we ready, ladies?” he asked.

Christine looked at Ruthie, who nodded,
bashfully.

“I believe that we are,” she said.

“Well, then,” he said with a smile. “We
should be off.”

* * *

“Here we are, ladies,” Duncan said, as they reached the balcony. He could not help but smile as the two women looked around in awe, much as they had at the inn. He pretended to look away when they shared a look and a joyful laugh. It warmed his heart to see Christine enjoying herself so much. She certainly deserved it, and Duncan hoped for the chance to help her do so much more often.

Once they made their way to their seats, Duncan pulled out three pairs of theater glasses. He placed one in his lap and handed

the others to Ruthie and Christine. The women exchanged another happy look and put the glasses to their eyes. They talked excitedly to one another, and Duncan sat back, relaxed and content to watch Christine so happy and carefree. He felt as though he were truly seeing her for the first time, and he took in every moment of her joy.

Suddenly, Christine's laughter ceased. Duncan looked at her carefully and saw her become statuesque and pale. She remained that way for several moments, her gaze

seemingly fixed on something all the way across the theater. Duncan lifted his own glasses, but he could not see anything that might have completely captured her attention, let alone anything that would have so drastically changed her demeanor. Concerned, he put his glasses back into his lap and turned to her.

“Miss Becker?” he asked. “Is everything alright?”

Christine did not seem to hear him at

first. He waited a moment before speaking again.

“Miss Becker,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the other voices conversing around them.

This time, she turned to face him, her head moving slowly, almost mechanically. He saw just how pale she was and noticed that she was sweating. Instinctively, he reached out and put his hand on hers, which he found to be clammy and cold.

“What is it?” he asked, his concern rising rapidly.

“Forgive me,” she said, her voice weak and trembling. “I am suddenly very dizzy and lightheaded.”

Duncan reached for Christine’s hand.

“Would you like to leave?” he asked.

Christine smiled weakly and shook her

head.

“No, my lord,” she said, doing her best to reassure him. “I am sure this will pass. It must be all the excitement.”

Duncan was not convinced. He studied her face for several moments, debating how best to help her. He did not wish to embarrass her if she did not want to leave, but he feared that she might faint, which would likely be more humiliating for her.

“Miss Becker?” Ruthie asked gently. Her voice startled Duncan. He had temporarily forgotten that she was there.

Christine looked at her maid and tried to push herself up in her chair.

“Everything is fine,” she said, her smile more of a grimace. “Really, I am . . .”

Her voice trailed off, and she collapsed back into her seat, her eyelids fluttering.

Duncan looked at Ruthie, panic setting in. Ruthie's expression of fright gave him the answer he sought.

“Come, Miss Becker,” he said, reaching gently for her arm. “We must get you out of here.”

He held his breath, expecting her to continue protesting. However, rather than insist that she was fine, Christine nodded feebly, staring at something across the theater.

Duncan looked at Ruthie.

“Let us help her back to the carriage,” he
said.

Chapter 13

Charlotte feared that she might swoon as she stared across the theater. Even as Duncan began to help her from her seat and lead her to the entrance, she could not take her eyes off the sight before her. There, seated directly across from them, and using theater glasses identical to her own, sat her mother. She could not know for certain if her mother had spotted her, but she was sure that she soon would. Yet, despite that knowledge, she felt frozen where she stood. What on earth was her mother doing there? As far back as

Charlotte could remember, her mother had never had any interest in the arts.

“Miss Becker,” a voice said from somewhere distant. “Come, let us get you out of here.”

Charlotte was vaguely aware that it was Duncan who was speaking to her. The room was spinning, and her heart was threatening to pound straight through her chest. At last, however, she felt a delicate tug on her hand, causing her to jump and gasp.

“Miss Becker,” she heard Ruth say. “Lord Willetton and I are right here. Let us get you to the carriage.”

Charlotte looked numbly to her other side and saw Duncan standing there, looking as frightened as she felt. She realized that they must have been trying to help her up for a few moments, and she grew warm with embarrassment. She slowly nodded and turned her gaze away from her mother. She barely noticed the people staring at the trio as they

made their way out of the theater. All she could think about was how mistaken she had been to think that she could show herself in public so soon after she was supposed to have sailed to France.

“Miss Becker?” Duncan’s voice called her back from her thoughts. “Can you hear me?”

Charlotte realized that they were already in the carriage and on their way back to Duncan’s home. She tried to nod her head, but the carriage began to spin just as the theater

balcony had. She leaned her head back against the coach seat and swallowed dryly.

“Yes,” she whispered. “I am just feeling a little unwell.”

Duncan was silent for a moment, and Charlotte dared to crack her eyes open. He was staring at her, the worry creasing his brow.

“Forgive me,” he said. “But you look more than just a little unwell.”

“I just need a little fresh air and some of rest,” she said, cursing herself for yet another lie. “I will be fine.”

However, by the time they had arrived back at Duncan’s estate, she felt even worse than she had at the theater. Her heart was beating faster than ever before, and she was drenched with sweat. She was suddenly very certain that her mother had indeed spotted her, and that word would very soon reach Duncan about her true identity. Duncan’s

intense scrutiny did little to comfort or calm her. She irrationally feared that he would see all her secrets as plainly on her face as she could hear them screaming in her head.

She hardly registered her surroundings, until Duncan and Ruth began helping her onto a bed. She blinked and tried to focus on where she was, and saw that she was lying in a large, soft, bed, covered with a deep-purple blanket and canopied with fabric of the same shade. She shook her head, trying to understand what was happening. When she tried to speak, she

found that her mouth was dry, and her voice would not cooperate.

“It’s alright, my lady,” Ruth said, taking her hand. “Just relax.”

Charlotte looked at her, confused. Ruth’s eyes were kind and full of worry. She allowed her maid to help her lie back onto the bed. Behind Ruth, Charlotte could hear Duncan shuffling around doing something. However, when she turned her head to look at him, she became dizzy and disoriented again. She

closed her eyes and tried to take a couple of deep breaths.

The next thing she knew, something cold and damp was touching her forehead. Her eyes flew open, and she saw Duncan sitting beside her, pressing a wet cloth to her face. Her heart ached to see the worry and distress on his face.

“We will take care of you, Miss Becker,” he said. “Don’t worry about a thing.”

Charlotte lifted her hand and closed it around Duncan's.

"I am fine," she croaked weakly.

Duncan frowned.

"I do not believe that you are," he said.

"In fact, I would like you to stay here, in my home, until you are well again."

Charlotte's heart stopped. She knew what Duncan could not. She knew that her sudden

illness had been caused by seeing her mother, and she knew the very real possibility that her true identity would soon be exposed.

She had no doubt that she would recover quickly once she was away from Duncan and back in the comfort of the room she shared with Ruth at the inn. However, she also knew that, to prove to him that she was alright, she would very likely have to incriminate herself. And with Duncan being so kind and worried about her wellbeing, she could not bring herself to hurt him that way. She was trapped,

and she had no choice but to go along with his wishes. Too frightened to speak, she merely nodded her head.

Duncan's relief was apparent. He managed a weak smile and nodded.

“Good,” he said. “And, of course, Ruthie will be welcome to stay here with you, to help keep you comfortable and keep an eye on you.”

Charlotte dared to glance at Ruth, who

was still sitting beside her, holding her hand. Ruth's eyes looked as fearful as she felt, and Charlotte closed her eyes again. How had everything gone so wrong? Why had she been foolish enough to try going out in public with Duncan? Charlotte groaned at the thought of how she had thoughtlessly compromised everything she had worked to build by going to the theater.

Duncan, still clueless as to what was ailing her, became alarmed once more.

“I believe that a physician should examine you,” he said.

Once more, Charlotte felt as though she might faint. *Could this situation get any worse?*

She tried to shake her head and give Duncan a reassuring look.

“Really, my lord,” she said. “That will not be necessary. I assure you that I will be fine shortly. This is just a spell of some sort, and it will be over soon.”

Duncan seemed to think it over for a moment. Charlotte felt that, perhaps, she had gotten him to see reason.

“Are you prone to these types of spells?”
he asked.

Charlotte opened her mouth to speak, but Ruth chimed in.

“No, my lord,” she said. “She had never had such an episode in all the time that I have

known her.”

Charlotte looked at Ruth, horrified. Ruth, however, was focused on Duncan, and could not see Charlotte’s desperate expression.

Duncan nodded decisively.

“You must stay here overnight,” he said.

“And I will send for a doctor first thing in the morning.”

Panicked, Charlotte looked at Ruth, who

still wore a look of fear. She needed to tell Ruth what had really happened and see if they could think of a way to get her out of there.

At last Duncan rose to his feet.

“I will have the servants make you some broth,” he said.

Charlotte heaved a sigh of relief. She was far from hungry, but it would likely be her only opportunity to speak to Ruth in private.

“Thank you,” she said with a smile.

Duncan nodded and exited the room.

As soon as they were alone, Charlotte grabbed Ruth’s hands.

“Oh, Ruth,” she said, her tears flowing freely. “I am not ill.”

Ruth looked at her as though she were mad.

“You certainly could have fooled me,” she said. “I was not aware that snow white was a healthy color for once rosy skin.”

Charlotte chuckled despite herself.

“Please,” she said. “I need you to listen to me.”

Ruth sensed the urgency in Charlotte’s voice and she nodded, falling silent.

“Tonight, at the theater, I saw Mother,”

she said, shuddering violently as she recalled how spotting her mother had made her feel.

Ruth's eyes widened and understanding flooded her expression.

“Oh, no,” she whispered. “Do you believe that she saw you?”

Charlotte shrugged weakly.

“I cannot say,” she said. “I was so panicked and surprised that I could not tell if

she recognized me.”

Ruth covered her mouth with her hands.

“Is it the fright and worry about seeing her that has you in this state?” Ruth asked.

Charlotte nodded.

“I am not sick at all,” she repeated. “I just cannot compose myself. I was near hysteria, and I could not control it. Oh, I am so humiliated.”

Ruth nodded.

“I understand,” she said, relief flooding her face. Charlotte smiled, grateful to be able to tell someone the truth about her condition.

“What will you do when the physician arrives?”

Charlotte shook her head.

“Well,” she said. “If I look as unwell as the two of you are saying, I will at least not

need to tell yet another lie.”

Ruth nodded once more.

“You certainly look unwell,” she said. “I believe that even a doctor will believe that you are very ill.”

Charlotte laughed dryly.

“Well, thank goodness for a small favor,” she said. She felt anything but grateful, however. Even if she did not directly tell

Duncan a lie about her health, she was still lying by omitting the truth.

The door slowly opened, pulling the women's attention away from their conversation. Charlotte smiled weakly, expecting to see Duncan walk back into the room to check on her. Her heart leapt into her throat once more, however, when she saw who was entering the room.

“Oh, dear,” Helena said, folding her hands together, her brow creasing with what

Charlotte assumed was supposed to be concern. “Duncan told me that you were unwell, and it would appear he was quite correct.”

She made her way into the room, brushing past Ruth as though she was invisible.

“Duncan also told me that he has insisted that you stay here until you are well again,” Helena continued.

Charlotte closed her eyes. Helena's cruelty and disdain were the last things she needed right then, but she was too weak and upset to put up a fight. Instead, she stared blankly at the thin woman, refusing to let Helena bait her.

Helena glanced over her shoulder in Ruth's direction.

"Maid, leave us for a moment," she said.
"I would like to speak to Miss Becker privately."

Ruth looked terrified, but she did not move.

“I believe that Lord Willetton wished for me to sit in here with Miss Becker,” she said weakly. “In case she should need something.”

Helena raised a hand, still not looking directly at Ruth.

“You may wait in the hall,” she said flatly. “I will fetch you when we are done

speaking.”

Ruth looked at Charlotte silently for confirmation. Charlotte looked at Helena, then back at Ruth. She gave her maid a small nod. Ruth stood for a moment longer, clearly hesitant to leave the two women in the room alone together. After a moment, however, she dipped her head and exited the room wordlessly.

When Helena was satisfied that she would not be overheard, she turned her

attention back to Charlotte.

“Whatever ploy of yours this is, you will cease it at once,” she hissed.

Charlotte stared at the woman, wishing that she were anywhere else.

“Ploy?” Charlotte asked.

Helena loomed over her, glaring.

“I do not believe for a single moment

that you are ill,” she said.

Charlotte chuckled dryly.

“What reason could I possibly have for feigning an ailment?” she asked.

Helena crossed her arms.

“You wish to gain my son’s sympathy,” she said. “And, I do believe, his heart.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. She had

thought Helena was just a shrew. Now, she was beginning to think that she was a madwoman.

“Well,” Charlotte said, too unwell to tolerate Helena’s nonsense. “I certainly have a unique talent, to be capable of faking such a state of ill health.”

Helena leaned down, her eyes full of pure hatred.

“I do not care how you managed it,” she

said, “but I will say this only once. You will cease this act immediately.”

Charlotte gave the woman a weak glare in return.

“Of course, my lady,” she said, her voice feeble but full of sarcasm. “I shall snap my fingers and will away all the symptoms that I am clearly feigning.”

Helena continued her relentless gaze, acting as though Charlotte had not spoken.

“And you will not do something foolish, like fall in love with Duncan,” she said. “If you do, I will make your employment, and your life, quite unpleasant. Do I make myself clear?”

Charlotte stared, bewildered. She could not believe what she was hearing.

Rather than waiting for Charlotte to respond, Helena stormed for the door. As soon as she opened it, her entire demeanor

changed, sending a chill down Charlotte's spine. Helena smiled warmly and turned in the open doorway to face Charlotte.

“I do hope you get well soon, darling,” she said loudly.

Charlotte stared after her in disbelief, even as Ruth reentered the room. Ruth noticed her strained expression and closed the door once more.

“What happened?” she asked.

Charlotte shook her head, looking at
Ruth with wide eyes.

“I really must get out of here, Ruth,” she
said.

Chapter 14

Duncan sat in his study, drinking his favorite brandy. He was deeply worried about Christine. Despite her insistence that she was fine, she looked quite the opposite. He feared that she had some sort of heart condition of which no one had been aware. Or perhaps she was afflicted by a serious illness, and that was the reason behind her odd behavior earlier in the week.

He decided that he would not and could not sleep that night. Instead he intended to

ride into town himself and fetch a physician as early as possible. He did not know what was ailing Christine, but he intended to get answers as quickly as he could, and to do anything he needed to help her get well. He would spare no expense nor leave any options unexplored. All that mattered to him was getting Christine better. He was falling in love with her, and he could not bear the thought of losing her.

The next morning, he left his home at dawn and rode straight into town. He arrived

at the office of the nearest physician, which, fortunately, was the same doctor that saw him when he was a child. He had gone to this man intentionally, and he was prepared to wait as long as necessary. As soon as he saw the physician, he wasted no time with formalities.

“Doctor Johnson, please,” Duncan said hurriedly, “I need your assistance.”

The physician looked at him in bewilderment.

“Of course, Lord Willeton,” he said.

“What is it that you need?”

“I have an emergency, and I need you to come at once,” he said.

Dr. Johnson nodded and put his hand on Duncan’s shoulder.

“What’s happened?” he asked, concerned.

“Are you quite well?”

Duncan nodded quickly.

“I am fine,” he said. “It is my assistant. She has fallen suddenly ill. Will you come see her?”

Dr. Johnson nodded.

“Of course,” he said. “Just let me fetch my medical bag from my study.”

Duncan nodded, flooded with relief.

“Thank you, Doctor,” he said.

When Duncan and Dr. Johnson reached his home, Ruthie was pacing outside Christine's room. She ran up to him when she saw Duncan racing up the stairs.

“My lord,” Ruthie said, her eyes full of tears. “I do not know what is happening, but Lady Helena has closed the door to Miss Becker's room and will not let me see her.”

Duncan's heart fell.

“I have brought the doctor,” he said.

“Please, excuse us.”

Ruthie nodded as Duncan brushed past her, ushering the physician into Christine’s room. He burst through the door and found Christine even paler than she had been the night before, and his mother standing over her like some sort of predator. When his mother saw the men enter the room, her expression brightened.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she said, wringing

her hands. “I am afraid that the young lady is not faring well at all.”

“Excuse us, Mother,” Duncan hissed, not believing her worried pretense. “The physician must examine Miss Becker now.”

Helena smiled knowingly at the doctor and tipped her head.

“Of course,” she said, slowly moving toward the door. “I do hope you can determine what is ailing our little Miss

Beckner.”

Duncan glared at his mother, as she exited the room. She knew full well what Christine’s name was, and it infuriated him when she purposely misspoke it.

Before leaving the room himself, Duncan walked over to Christine and touched her gently on the forehead.

“I will be just outside the door,” he said softly, surprised to find himself choking back

tears. “I have known Dr. Johnson for many years, and he will take excellent care of you. I promise.”

Christine smiled weakly at him, and Duncan saw that tears were welling in her eyes, as well. He wanted nothing more in that moment than to take her into his arms, comfort her, and sit with her as the doctor examined her. Instead, for propriety's sake, he merely stroked her head once more and then left the room.

He was relieved that the hallway was empty when he closed the door behind him. His mother must have gone downstairs. *Good*, he thought. *Let her stay as far away from Christine as possible.* He was certainly in no mood to deal with his mother just then, and he knew that it would only put a strain on Christine's condition to have her hovering in her cold, harsh manner.

Duncan paced for what felt like an age, as he waited for the doctor to finish examining Christine. He checked his watch and saw that

it had been almost an hour since the doctor had arrived. His heart began to beat wildly. Why would the doctor take so long unless there was something seriously wrong? He forced himself to cease pacing and breathe deeply.

Dr. Johnson was most likely only being thorough, but that thought did nothing to assuage Duncan's worry. He was almost prepared to interrupt them and demand to know what was wrong when the door finally opened. Ruthie stood there, her eyes red from

crying, and she motioned him inside. Without hesitation, Duncan rushed in and went straight to Christine's side. Her face was paler than he had ever seen it, but her eyes were slowly beginning to close. The doctor looked at him and gave him a reassuring smile and gestured toward the bedroom door. Duncan followed him into the hall, reluctant to leave Christine's side.

The doctor closed the door behind them and clapped Duncan gently on the shoulder.

“I gave her something to help her sleep,”
he said.

Duncan nodded.

“Good,” he said. “Did you find what is
ailing her?”

The doctor shook his head slowly.

“Her heartbeat is rather high, and she is
very weak,” he said. “Otherwise she seems to
be in perfect health.”

Duncan frowned.

“There must be something causing this,” he said, frustrated. “She went from being completely well one moment to being like this the next.”

The doctor nodded.

“I agree,” the doctor said. “But without any other symptoms it is impossible to tell. She could have come down with a terrible

cold or had some sort of shock.”

Duncan shook his head. Something was wrong with Christine, and not even the doctor could understand what it was. He bit his lip and blinked back fresh tears.

Dr. Johnson patted his arm again.

“Do not worry,” he said. “I do believe she will recover. I think she just needs a few days’ rest and she will be as good as new.”

Duncan nodded, unconvinced.

The doctor smiled warmly.

“I will come back to check on Miss Becker in two days,” he said. “Just to be sure that she has not come down with some illness, and that there is no further need for concern. In the meantime, I have left the sleeping draught on the bedside table. She can have a dose every evening. I also suggest that if her heart begins racing as it was just now, you give her the nighttime dose early.”

Duncan nodded, feeling a small measure of relief. If the doctor thought she needed bed rest and planned to examine her again in a couple of days, that meant Duncan could keep Christine here with him, where he would be able to keep an eye on her. The idea comforted Duncan, and he allowed himself to relax.

“Thank you, Dr. Johnson,” he said.

“Please, allow me to walk you to the door.”

As he closed the door, Duncan spotted his mother creeping toward the stairs. Duncan rushed to stop her.

“Mother,” he said. “I would like you to leave. Miss Becker is in no condition to receive company.”

Helena’s eyes widened in innocence.

“Oh, Duncan,” she said. “I only wish to help the poor young woman. I can sit with her and help should she need anything.”

Duncan shook his head firmly.

“Her maid is here to fetch her anything she needs,” he said, “and I will be checking in on her periodically. Your assistance will not be required.”

Helena’s face fell into a false expression of hurt.

“You do not think me capable of helping a sick girl?” she asked.

Duncan sneered.

“The doctor gave strict instructions for Miss Becker to rest,” he said. “She will rest better with minimal intrusions.”

Helena let her head fall, and she nodded.

“Forgive me,” she said. “Of course, you are right. I am just worried for the poor girl. I will return tomorrow and look in on her.”

Duncan's anger swelled, and he bit his tongue to keep from raising his voice. His concern just then was for Christine, and he had no time to argue with his overbearing mother. He nodded noncommittally and ushered her out through the front door. He would not allow Helena to see Christine the following day. He knew how poorly his mother treated her, and he did not intend to allow Helena anywhere near Christine.

He was sitting in the library that afternoon, trying unsuccessfully to read a book

when there was a soft knock on the door.

Duncan set the book down and looked up to see Ruthie peeking timidly into the room.

“Hello, Ruthie,” he said warmly, rising from his seat. “How is Miss Becker?”

Ruthie stopped just inside the door.

“She is asking for you, my lord,” she said quietly.

Duncan rushed to the door immediately.

“I will go to her now,” he said. “Thank you.”

Ruthie nodded shyly in response, stepping out of Duncan’s way so that he could reach the stairs.

When he opened the bedroom door, Christine’s appearance gave him a fresh shock. She looked even frailer than she had that morning, and her eyes were dull, with dark circles forming beneath them. He bit his lip,

struggling to keep his dismay from showing on his face.

“Ruthie said you asked for me,” he said, his voice husky with emotion.

Christine nodded weakly.

“I wanted to thank you wholeheartedly for your kindness and hospitality,” she said.

“However, I do not wish to impose. I will rest perfectly well in our room at the inn.”

Duncan smiled. Even in her current state, she was thinking of everyone but herself.

“Nonsense,” he said, sitting in the chair beside the bed. He took her hand, which he was disheartened to find was still cold and clammy. “You have done so much for me. Please, allow me this opportunity to help you during your illness.”

Christine looked at him for a moment, her eyes unreadable. Even as ill as she looked, she seemed to be thinking deeply about

something. After a moment, she gave a sad smile.

“I suppose you will not be dissuaded,” she said.

Duncan’s smile brightened. Her attempt at humor brought him a little relief.

“You are correct, Miss Becker,” he said.
“Besides, the physician will be back in two days to reexamine you and ensure that you are quite well.”

Christine closed her eyes, but she nodded slowly, rather than protesting.

“I am certain that will not be necessary,” she said. “But I will do as you ask, my lord.”

Duncan felt his relief deepen. He did not wish to keep her there against her will, but he could not bring himself to allow her to leave.

“I am glad,” he said. “I will have a dinner tray brought up in a few hours.”

Christine nodded, and Duncan noticed that her eyes were getting heavy again. He stood quietly and looked down at her. Without thinking, he reached down and brushed a strand of damp hair from her forehead. She murmured quietly, and he withdrew his hand and left the room.

However, as he prepared to sit down to dinner, the servant tasked with taking Christine's tray to her approached him.

“She rejected the tray, my lord,” the young maid said.

Duncan frowned, and his stomach tightened. If she was too unwell to eat, he might need to summon the doctor again. He looked at the untouched tray the maid was holding and debated what he should do.

Before he could decide, however, Christine walked into the dining room, with Ruthie close at her side. Duncan almost overturned the tray when he jumped from his

seat.

“Miss Becker,” he said, rushing to her side. “What are you doing out of bed?”

Christine smiled. Her face was a little less pale, but she looked exhausted and shaky.

“I wanted to get out of the room for a little while,” she said. “I thought that I would dine down here with you, if that is alright.”

Duncan brightened. If she felt well

enough to come down for a meal, then perhaps she was on the mend.

“Of course,” he said, pulling out a chair for her. “You are always welcome to dine with me.”

He gestured to the maid to bring out two more plates for the women. Then he ensured that Christine was comfortable before reclaiming his seat.

“How are you feeling?” he asked her.

Christine waved her hand.

“I will be fine,” she said.

Duncan frowned.

“She slept nearly all afternoon,” Ruthie chimed in quickly. “I believe that helped her a great deal.”

Duncan studied Christine carefully. She did not appear to be rested, and she looked far

from healthy. Why would she not tell him how she was feeling?

The doctor's words about some sort of distress came back to him, and his mother's face flashed in his mind. On a hunch, he looked directly at Christine.

"I understand that you will need plenty of rest for the next couple of days," he said. "So, I have ensured that you will receive no visitors of any kind. Especially my mother."

As he had anticipated, Christine's expression changed drastically. Duncan thought he could see some of the color return to her cheeks and her eyes clear, as though a cloud had dissipated behind them.

“You are very kind, my lord,” she said.
“You did not need to do such a thing just for me.”

Duncan smiled, hiding his renewed anger toward his mother.

“I beg to differ,” he said. “The doctor gave strict instructions for you to rest as much as possible. I intend to make sure you do so.”

Christine and Ruthie exchanged glances, and Duncan noted the clear relief they both felt. They discussed books throughout the meal, but Duncan couldn't focus on the conversation. It was clear to him that, whatever was wrong with Christine, his mother was doing a great deal to exacerbate her condition.

With each passing day he knew her,
Duncan cared for Christine more and more,
and he wanted nothing more than for her to
care for him in return. It was also clear that
would not happen until Helena stopped
distressing Christine. He knew he must do
something quickly. He could not allow his
mother another chance to drive Christine
away. If he did, he did not doubt that she
would succeed.

Chapter 15

Charlotte could not get a minute of proper rest while she stayed in Duncan's home. The room was wonderful, the view of the gardens from the window was spectacular, and Duncan and his staff were more than gracious and accommodating. However, she knew in her heart that she did not deserve the kind treatment she was receiving.

With each moment that passed, she felt guiltier about the lies she had told Duncan, especially as she mentally rehearsed what she

would say the next time she saw Helena Lancaster. She could not bring herself to continue lying, but she had to be more prepared for the woman's verbal attacks. She only needed to buy enough time to convince Duncan that she was not ill, so that he would let her return to the inn.

On the morning that the doctor was supposed to return, Charlotte rose early. Before Ruth set about her daily duties, she helped Charlotte dress and fixed her hair in a simple style. Much of Charlotte's color had

returned, but her eyes looked a little bruised, and the crease above her brow appeared to have deepened. She was determined to convince Duncan that she was much better, however, and she would do whatever it took to accomplish that.

When Duncan came to check on her, she was sitting by the window with a book in her lap. She stood when he entered the room and gave him her best, brightest smile.

“Good morning, my lord,” she said with a

curtsy.

Duncan looked at her with a mixture of surprise and relief.

“Good morning, Miss Becker,” he said. “It is wonderful to see you in such high spirits.”

“I am excited to be returning to the inn,” she said.

Duncan’s face fell.

“Is something here not to your liking?”

he asked.

Charlotte’s heart ached. She did not want him to think that she had been unhappy in his home. Nothing could be further from the truth, but nor could she tell him the truth. She thought quickly, forcing herself to keep her smile light and sweet.

“You have been perfectly wonderful,” she said, “and your hospitality has been magnificent. I have been very comfortable

here, and very well cared for. I am simply ready to stop being a bedridden patient and return to doing something useful.”

Duncan relaxed, but he did not seem much happier, despite her explanation.

“I can certainly appreciate that,” he said.
“Please know, however, that you are welcome here until you are completely healed.”

Charlotte nodded, feeling a rush of love and gratitude towards Duncan.

“You are most gracious,” she said. “But now that I am feeling better, there are some things that I would like to take care of at the inn.”

Duncan looked relieved that she was acting more like herself, but his disappointment at her departure was evident. It should have warmed her heart that he wanted her to stay. Instead it only fueled her guilt.

“Very well,” he said. “Once the doctor has examined you, I shall arrange for your return to the inn.

Charlotte touched Duncan’s arm gently.

“Thank you very much, my lord,” she said. “Do not fear, I am not leaving my job. I am simply putting an end to being an invalid.”

Duncan laughed, and Charlotte melted at the sound.

“Well, that is a relief, Miss Becker,” he said. “I would be forced to send a search party after you if you failed to arrive for work.”

Charlotte laughed with Duncan for a moment. Then, he bowed briefly to her.

“If you will excuse me,” he said. “I will fetch the doctor. The sooner he examines you, the sooner you can be on your way.”

Charlotte smiled gratefully at him.

“I will wait right here,” she said.

As Duncan closed the door behind him, she sat back down in her chair and buried her face in her hands. She wished more than anything that the situation was different. She was beginning to struggle more and more with her feelings for Duncan, and she knew that she could not afford to let her resolve weaken.

The sound of the door opening startled Charlotte. She rose quickly, to be greeted by the sight of Helena entering the room with a

kitchen maid. Charlotte stifled a groan, and another bout of dizziness. She sat carefully in the chair and forced a pleasant smile.

“Good morning, my lady,” she said.

The kitchen maid hurried in behind her and placed the tray on the bedside table.

“Well, Miss Becker,” Helena said bitterly.

“I do hope you are feeling better. I thought that I would have some breakfast brought in for you.” She gave the kitchen maid a

dismissive wave.

Truthfully, Charlotte was feeling worse by the day, but it was due to her own guilt and the constant fear that her secret would be exposed. However, she knew that Helena had relished terrorizing her while she had been ill, and she wanted nothing more than to disappoint the woman.

“Thank you,” Charlotte said, forcing a bright smile. “Indeed, I do feel a great deal better. Lord Willetton has been most gracious,

and the doctor has been very kind.”

Helena sniffed.

“So it would seem,” she said, turning up her nose at Charlotte. “I still cannot help but wonder if you are telling the truth.”

Charlotte’s stomach flipped.

“Of course, I am,” she said, trying to seem confused and nonchalant. “Why would I be dishonest about my health?”

Instead of answering her question, however, Helena began pacing, never taking her eyes off Charlotte. Dread swelled in Charlotte's stomach, and she once more felt as though she might swoon.

“It would be a shame if my son discovered that you were untruthful about your condition,” she said. “He has invested so much time and money in treating your illness. He would be devastated to learn that you had lied to him.”

Charlotte's heart began to pound. For a terrible moment, she feared a relapse of the panic and sickness that had gripped her for the past few days. *She knows*, Charlotte thought, as renewed fear gripped her. *She knows, and she is going to tell Duncan.*

Helena seemed to revel in Charlotte's reaction. Charlotte cursed herself, knowing that her paling, clammy skin was all the proof Helena needed. Charlotte prayed for some miracle that would bring her calm and return

the healthy appearance she was finally beginning to regain, but no miracle came. She opted instead to attack.

“I wonder what Lord Willetton would think about his mother interrogating me as though I am some sort of criminal, when I have recently been so ill,” Charlotte said, putting on her bravest, toughest façade as she spoke.

Helena chuckled.

“If you blatantly lied to him,” she said, speaking slowly as if to a young child. “I would imagine that he would be grateful to me for sparing him any further embarrassment.”

Charlotte kept her gaze fixed firmly on Helena’s, but her heart fell into her stomach. Helena was right, of course, and it was one of Charlotte’s worst fears. Now, however, was not the time to succumb to those concerns. She needed to diffuse Helena’s suspicions, and then she could figure out the rest.

“If I ever did anything to hurt Lord Willeton, I am sure that I would deserve whatever repercussions he deemed fit,” Charlotte snapped.

Helena nodded.

“I could not agree more,” she said with a smirk. She continued to pace in silence for a moment, tapping her finger on her chin as though she was thinking about something. Then she stopped suddenly and looked at

Charlotte.

“Do you enjoy gossip, Miss Becker?”

Helena asked.

Charlotte blinked. She had no doubt that Helena was up to something, and the feeling in her stomach told her that it could not be anything good.

“No,” she said at last. “I believe that gossip is poison, and best left to those with nothing better to do.”

Helena laughed, unfazed by Charlotte's masked insult.

“Oh, but one can learn a great deal from it,” she said. “There is often a morsel of truth in every piece of gossip.”

Charlotte shrugged, feigning nonchalance.

“I have found that there is more likely a bored, miserable person behind all gossip, or

an outright liar, rather than truth or proven fact,” she said.

Helena’s sudden change of expression made Charlotte want to laugh. She pressed her lips together and stifled the urge. She did, however, dare to meet Helena’s gaze with a twinkle of humor in her eyes. Whatever point the woman was about to make, Charlotte intended to enjoy every opportunity she could to fluster her.

The woman’s frustration was short-lived.

She folded her arms again, and the smirk returned to her face.

“It is quite interesting that you should say that,” she said. “Because it would seem that there are people in the ton who believe you look quite familiar.”

Charlotte swallowed, her humor evaporating. However, she braced herself for Helena’s scrutiny. So long as she was only bluffing, she could brazen it out.

“Well, I am far from the only blonde-haired woman in the ton,” she said.

Helena’s smirk did not fade this time, and Charlotte felt her unease return.

“Perhaps,” she said. “But that does not explain how so many people are sure that they have seen you at society balls over the last couple of years?”

Charlotte felt as though the floor suddenly vanished from beneath her. Whoever

Helena had spoken to must have seen her at the theater. If they mentioned seeing her at balls, what else had they said?

“They must have me confused with someone else,” Charlotte said, trying to remain strong and unfazed, despite her increasing light-headedness.

Helena studied her silently for a moment, and Charlotte held her breath. She could only hope that this was Helena’s only information, and that the conversation would end soon.

“Something tells me that is not the case, though,” Helena said. “In fact, I am certain of it.”

Charlotte walked over to the window, turning her back on the woman. She could not let Helena see how deeply her words upset her.

“I should think that I would know better than anyone who I am,” Charlotte said.

Helena laughed heartily.

“That is precisely my point, dear,” she said. “I believe that you know who you are. I do not, however, believe that Duncan does.”

Charlotte closed her eyes, cursing herself for her poor choice of words. She took several deep breaths and tried to allow the sunlight coming in through the window to calm and soothe her. Whatever else Helena had to say to her, she would hear it without any kind of response. She needed the woman to leave her

alone, even if she had to anger her to make that happen.

“Duncan has let you into his life,” Helena continued. “He has become attached to you, for whatever reason, and he would be devastated to find that you were playing some sort of hoax on him.”

Charlotte did not move, but her stomach lurched. She felt tears stinging her eyes, and she fought an intense wave of nausea.

Just then, Duncan walked into the room. Charlotte had to put her hand on the window to keep herself from collapsing with relief. He looked at his mother and then back at her. He walked straight to her side, without addressing his mother, and smiled.

“The doctor will be here within the hour,” Duncan said, looking back and forth between Charlotte and his mother. “Would you like to join me in the drawing room to await his arrival?”

“No,” Charlotte said firmly. “I would like to go back to the inn now, my lord.”

Duncan took a deep breath, and Charlotte knew he intended to protest, but she had to get away from Helena before the stress of the woman’s interrogation caused her faint in front of them both. She lifted her head and squared her shoulders, looking as tough and determined as she possibly could.

At last, Duncan sighed. He cast a dark look at his mother, then turned back to

Charlotte.

“Very well,” he said. “We will leave at
once.”

Chapter 16

Duncan gave Christine a few moments to gather her belongings. He called for one of the servants to tidy up the bedroom in which she had been staying, as he waited for her to be ready to leave. He was aware of his mother following closely behind him as he left Christine's room, but he was determined to ignore her. Helena, however, would not be so easily dismissed. When Duncan refused to turn and address her, she put her hand on his

shoulder. Duncan took a sharp turn, effectively yanking his arm away from her. When that failed, Helena maneuvered herself around Duncan and blocked his path. Furious, and in no mood to play games with his mother, he stopped and glared at her.

“Mother,” he said, not bothering to feign any semblance of civility. “I am sure you are aware that I will be leaving soon to escort Miss Becker and her friend home. I expect you to also depart before I return.”

Helena laughed.

“Oh, Duncan,” she said. “There is no need to be so dramatic. We have other business to discuss, and there is no reason why I cannot wait for you to return.”

Duncan gave a loud, dry laugh.

“We do not have any further business to discuss, and a dramatic form of address is the only type you seem to understand,” he said.

Helena sniffed.

“It never ceases to amaze me how you speak to me,” she said. “I only wish to help, especially as you do not seem capable of making prudent decisions for yourself.”

Duncan stared at his mother, stunned at her audacity.

“And to what decisions, precisely, are you referring?” he asked.

Helena looked at him as though he were mad.

“Do you really believe that I do not see the way you look at that servant girl?” she asked incredulously.

Duncan smirked.

“Do you mean Ruthie?” he asked sarcastically.

Helena glared at him, and Duncan felt a

slight sensation of satisfaction. He hated bickering with his mother, but he would not stand for her being unreasonable. Which, unfortunately, she was for most of the time.

“You know full well of whom I speak,” Helena hissed.

Duncan chuckled, refusing to give his mother what she so clearly wanted.

“No, Mother,” he said, feigning utter boredom. “I am afraid that I have no idea

what you mean.”

Helena crossed her arms furiously.

“You allowed that servant girl into your home, just because she had a dizzy spell,” she said, her eyes glowing with fury. “And you expect me to believe that you have no idea what I mean?”

Duncan looked at his mother, his anger rising, but his face betraying none of his true feelings.

“I invited her into my home because she is my employee,” he said, speaking slowly and deliberately. “It is my duty to ensure all of my employees are healthy, so they can continue their work for me.”

Helena burst out laughing, and Duncan thought it was the most cold and grating sound he had ever heard.

“Servants are one a penny,” she said. “If one falls ill, they can always be replaced.”

Duncan clenched a fist behind his back.

His mother's incapacity to care about anyone who was remotely below her station sickened him, and it made him wonder how he could possibly be related to such a cold, dismissive woman. However, if there was one thing he knew about his mother, it was that she wanted him to be angry and defensive. She thrived on upsetting people, even her own son. So, instead of attacking her with his words, he merely smiled.

“You are right,” he said. “But, as you may well know, it is wise to hold on to those that work the hardest and keep to themselves.”

It had been a long shot, but Helena caught his underlying meaning.

“I would keep more to myself if you were not continuously so ill-considered with your words and actions,” she said.

Duncan chuckled again.

“What actions are you speaking of?” he asked. He was well aware what his mother meant, but he was determined to force her to say it. He had finally figured out that she was the source of Christine’s distress, and he made sure that she knew she would not get away with it, even if it meant stooping to her level.

As he had hoped, Helena’s cheeks flooded an angry crimson. She put her hands on her hips and stared at her son. Duncan kept his expression calm, which seemed to anger

his mother further.

“You are falling in love with that servant girl,” she said at last, her voice high pitched and distressed, “and yet you know nothing about her.”

Duncan shrugged, avoiding his mother’s gaze, knowing well that the gesture irritated her more than anything.

“What I do know about her is that she is kind, hardworking, and dutiful,” he said.

Helena huffed.

“So, you choose to refuse to heed my warnings about her,” she said. Her words were a statement rather than a question, but Duncan felt compelled to answer anyway.

“Why should I heed any warnings from you, when they all stem from jealousy?” Duncan asked.

Helena looked at him, for a moment

seeming genuinely confused.

“I beg your pardon?” she asked.

“You have some problem with every woman who shows an interest in me,” he said, tired of the charade his mother insisted on. “For some reason or another, no woman is good enough for me.”

Helena nodded, her previous coldness and confidence returning.

“You are naïve, Duncan,” she said, “and these women are taking advantage of it, of you. You are too blind to see it. I am merely trying to protect my son.”

Duncan bellowed with laughter. The idea of Helena trying to protect him was hysterical, and certainly not something he had ever experienced. She did a wonderful job of protecting herself, but she thought of no one else. It had been that way all his life.

“Protect me?” Duncan echoed. “If you

wished to protect me and my interests, you would want me to marry, so that I might produce an heir and keep our fortune and titles in the family.”

Helena’s face paled, and for a moment Duncan thought she might storm from the room. However, she recovered herself quickly and straightened her shoulders.

“I wish nothing more for you, Duncan,” she said. “But not if you are looking in the wrong direction.”

“What would you know of it?” he asked.

“More than you might realize,” Helena said. The look in her eyes told Duncan that she had much more to say.

“And what do you mean by that, Mother?” he asked.

True to form, Helena shrugged.

“When you are ready to listen to reason, I

will try once more to talk to you,” she said.

Duncan shook his head, tired of his mother’s games. As always, she had nothing of true consequence to say. She was merely trying to scare him away from Christine, and this time, he refused to let her win.

“Then, when you are ready to speak to me like an adult, we can finish this conversation,” he said.

Helena looked at him, clearly taken

aback at his dismissiveness.

“I am your mother,” she began, but
Duncan cut her off.

“You always will be,” he said, “but you
are also manipulative and angry. I refuse to
speak with you further on this matter until
you have something of substance to present to
me.”

Helena studied him for several moments,
and Duncan’s stomach flipped. He had no idea

what she was thinking, and he held his breath, not out of fear of her, but out of worry for what it was that she was keeping from him.

“Something of substance?” she asked, suddenly very interested.

Duncan swallowed. He had no idea what was going through her mind, but it gave him a heavy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

“Yes,” he said, with far more confidence than he felt. “Something of real, irrefutable

substance.”

Helena smirked and nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “As you wish.”

Duncan looked at her, searching for more words to say to her. However, she turned and left of her own accord. He had no idea what had just occurred, but he could not dismiss the feeling of dread that had settled in his bones. The one thing of which he was certain was that his mother had caused Christine great

distress. He felt an overwhelming sense of relief that it was not he who was making her uncomfortable, as well as anger and guilt that his own mother was the culprit. He stood looking after Helena long after she was gone, fighting his conflicting feelings. He was so lost in his thoughts that the soft, gentle voice behind him startled him.

“My lord?” Christine said quietly. “I am ready to leave as soon as it is convenient.”

Duncan whirled around to face Christine.

For a moment, he considered apologizing for his mother and promising that she would never have to see her again, if only she would agree to stay a little longer. As he studied her face, still a little pale and fatigued, and more than a little distressed, he could not bring himself to say it.

“Of course, Miss Becker,” he said.

Christine smiled sheepishly at him. Her still distraught countenance and her apparent guilt at what she perceived as inconveniencing

him made his heart squeeze, and he wished he could take her into his arms and kiss her forehead.

“Thank you, my lord,” she said, averting her gaze as she made her way to the front door.

Duncan studied her as she walked away, suddenly very sure that his mother had indeed succeeded in driving her away. He cursed himself for not removing his mother from his house and business long before Christine

entered his life. He was also overwhelmed with the desire to ask Christine what his mother had done to upset her, and to tell her that, no matter what it was, he would set everything straight and ensure that his mother never bothered her again.

Instead of saying any of those things, he simply remained silent and escorted Christine and Ruthie to the carriage.

Chapter 17

“My lady?” Ruth asked, as the carriage moved along the road that would take the two women back to the inn.

“Yes?” Charlotte said, not looking at her maid.

“Are you quite well?” Ruth asked.

Emotion overwhelmed her as she recalled Helena’s words, and tears began to stream down her cheeks. She buried her face in her

hands and wept softly. Ruth sat beside her and patted her arm gently, waiting patiently for Charlotte to be able to speak.

After a few moments, Charlotte lifted her head and looked at her companion. She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. Then she gave Ruth a brief synopsis of her conversation with Helena. The maid's expression went from one of sympathy and concern to one of surprise, and then of anger. When Charlotte had finished talking, Ruth took her hands.

“Why are you letting this woman say these things to you?” she asked, her eyes bright with fury.

Charlotte looked at her as though she were mad.

“Letting her?” she echoed. “I have little choice.”

Ruth shook her head fervently.

“She continues speaking to you this way because you do nothing to defend yourself,” she said, insistent.

Charlotte sighed.

“I have said plenty in my defense, Ruth,” she said, “but I am certain she knows our true identities. Besides, her own son has tried defending me, and she brushed him off as though he too were a servant.”

Ruth considered her words for a moment,

and Charlotte winced. She had forgotten to tell Ruth about her other conversations with Helena, and she had never intended to. She did not want Ruth to worry about their security, and she had foolishly believed that the situation with Duncan's mother would be resolved before she posed any real threat. However, after her most recent discussion with the horrid woman, she realized she had been wrong. Helena seemed determined to ruin her, and it was clear that she was well on her way to doing just that.

“Do not worry,” Charlotte added quickly.

“I have been saving most of my salary since we started working for Lord Willetton. Should we be discovered, and our employment terminated, we will have enough to get us by until we can find other work and lodgings.”

She gave Ruth her most reassuring smile, even though she was far less certain than she sounded.

Ruth nodded, but her eyes were still full of worry. Charlotte sat back in the seat, wishing desperately that her selfishness had

not gotten them into this mess. She could not rid herself of the sadness that weighed heavily on her heart. Despite the stress of worrying about her deceit, she had grown accustomed to seeing Duncan outside of her work hours. She had even become fond of his daily visits to check in on her before he retired for the evening. In truth, she had begun to feel closer to him in general, so much so that she missed him dearly already. However, after Helena's threats, she knew that those feelings would do her no good. At the same time, she knew she could not simply make herself forget them.

“Please don’t worry,” Charlotte said again. “I promise you that I will make everything all right.”

That night, as she tried to sleep, however, Charlotte could not help wondering if what she had said to Ruth was true. Could she make things right? Or had she allowed the charade to go on for so long that their situation was beyond repair? She knew that she had to try to fix things, especially for poor Ruth’s sake, but she could not summon the

confidence in her ability to do so.

When they reached Duncan's estate the next morning, Ruth practically ran toward the back of the house, and Charlotte felt another pang of guilt. She had no doubt that Ruth would be upset and worried all day, and she cursed herself for having spoken so carelessly. For the first time since this whole ordeal began, Charlotte felt completely alone, and she briefly thought that everything might have been better if she had just gone to France. At least then she would not be hurting everyone

she cared about.

With a sigh, she made her way to the study where Duncan was seated at his desk. He looked up when she entered and smiled.

“Good morning, Miss Becker,” he said, rising from his seat. “How are you feeling?”

Charlotte smiled, her troubles temporarily fading in the light of his warm greeting.

“Much better, thank you,” she said.

Duncan surveyed her for a moment, looking for any lingering signs of illness. When he saw none, his expression brightened further.

“I am glad,” he said. “Nevertheless, I would like you to be careful today. Do not strain yourself. There is nothing more important to me than your wellbeing.”

Charlotte shook her head fervently. She

was anxious to return to her normal routine. Though she loved Duncan for his continued concern, the current situation was anything but normal.

“You are worrying too much,” she said, making her voice as light as possible. “I am well. Believe me.”

Duncan stepped from behind his desk, stopping very close to Charlotte. He was looking at her with a mixture of concern and affection.

“I could not be gladder,” he said. “And I wish to keep it that way.”

Charlotte blushed, feeling a strong connection between them. For a brief moment, she wanted nothing more than for him to lean down and kiss her.

The moment was disrupted, however. Brisk footsteps echoed down the hallway, and in another minute, Helena Lancaster stood in the office doorway. She looked at the pair

standing so closely together, and she raised her eyebrows.

“What is this?” she demanded.

Charlotte looked at Duncan, unsure of what to say or do. His jaw tightened immediately, and his hands began to clench.

“This is me speaking with Miss Becker, Mother,” he said. “Which is absolutely none of your business.”

Helena cackled.

“Oh, Duncan,” she said. “You are quite mistaken in that regard.”

Duncan turned to face his mother.

“The only mistake I have made is not having you removed from my home this instant,” he said.

Helena looked at him, her expression snide and cold.

“I believe that you will at least wish to hear what I have to say first,” she said, glancing sideways at Charlotte. “Though, I very much doubt that she will.”

Charlotte watched Duncan’s eyes narrow, and, for a moment, she thought he was going to tell her to leave.

“Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Miss Becker,” Duncan said.

Helena laughed again, and the sound gave Charlotte chills.

“I believe this is a matter best discussed between the two of us first,” she said. This time, she turned her gaze toward Charlotte, staring at her with a spite-filled, meaningful look.

Charlotte felt the color drain from her face. Whatever it was that Helena was going to say had to be bad. Why would she not wish to oust Charlotte right away? Why send her

out of the room and speak to Duncan alone first?

Duncan looked at Charlotte, no doubt seeing the pallor of her face, and he took a step toward her. Charlotte, in her frantic state, took a step back and glanced instinctively at Helena. Duncan glared at his mother, then turned back to Charlotte, giving her a small but reassuring smile.

“Miss Becker,” he said softly. “Would you please give me a few moments alone with my

mother?”

Helena’s cold laughter cut through the warmth of Duncan’s tone.

“Yes, girl,” Helena said, clearly proud of her victory. “This is a private matter. For now.”

Charlotte forced herself to move. It was unusual for Duncan to ask her to leave, rather than sending his mother away. She could not help but wonder if, for some reason, Duncan

thought less of her, either because of something Helena had said or because of her ill spell. She smiled back at Duncan, altogether avoiding Helena's gaze.

“Of course, my lord,” she said with a curtsy. Without acknowledging his mother, she turned quickly and left the room. She started to close the door behind her, but the sudden slam of the door before she could touch the knob startled her. Now safely out from under Helena Lancaster's stare, Charlotte allowed herself to stare indignantly at the

door before she turned away to walk down the hall. The woman was certainly a shrew, and Charlotte longed to tell her how she had no right to treat anyone that way. She was becoming nastier and crueller by the day, and it seemed that not even her son was spared from her cold temperament.

Charlotte's indignance did not last long, however. As she stepped away from the door, she could hear Duncan's voice rise. She could not hear what he was saying, so she instinctively took a step back toward the door.

She glanced around, feeling guilty for eavesdropping, but unable to pull herself away from the room.

She moved as close to the door as she dared, trying to be as quiet as possible. However, all she could hear was Duncan's voice rising even more, and his mother's rising to match. Were they arguing over her again? Despite how muffled the words on the other side of the door were, she strained hard to listen for any words might relate to her, but she could make nothing out.

After several long, heated moments, Charlotte heard Helena storming toward the study door, and she raced down the hallway. She tried to make herself invisible and pretended to be interested in a book that had been lying on a bench just outside of the drawing room. However, Helena dashed straight for her and got so close that she could feel the woman's breath on her face.

“You thought that you could hide the truth from everyone,” she said, her eyes

burning and her voice wild, almost triumphant. “Even Duncan knows that you are keeping something hidden. Beware, young lady. Secrets do not stay hidden forever.”

With a proud, smug expression, Helena turned up her nose and walked out the door. Charlotte stood frozen, watching the woman leave. Was she telling the truth? Did Duncan suspect that she was keeping something from him?

Just then, Duncan walked out of his

study. He moved slowly and looked to be in a great deal of distress. All thoughts of herself quickly fled from Charlotte's mind, and she rushed to Duncan's side. Whatever had transpired between him and his mother had affected him terribly, and she hated seeing him so unlike his usual happy, calm self.

“Are you alright?” she asked, instinctively touching his arm. To her surprise, he did not withdraw from her touch.

“I will be fine,” he said. Charlotte's heart

broke at the weakness and uncertainty in his voice.

“Forgive me,” she said, seeing an opportunity to return the kindness and affection he had shown her when she was ill.

“You do not seem fine. Come.” She gently led him into the drawing room and guided him to a comfortable seat.

Once he was seated, she patted his arm.

“I will fetch you some tea,” she said,

leaving the room before he could protest. He would have sent one of the servants to get tea for them both, but she wanted to do something nice for him. She went into the kitchen and prepared some fresh tea, precisely the way he liked it. She carried the tray back into the drawing room and poured Duncan a cup. She gently handed it to him, then sat down beside him.

Duncan took a small sip of tea before placing the cup on the small table before them.

“Thank you,” he said without looking at her.

“Of course, my lord,” she said. “Would you like me to fetch anything else?”

“No,” Duncan said.

Charlotte flinched. He did not sound angry with her, but he was undoubtedly behaving oddly. It felt as though he was pushing her away. She looked at Duncan

pensively, feeling the full impact of her love for him. There was nothing she would not do for him, and she wished more than ever that Helena would vanish from Duncan's life so that she could never hurt him again.

However, Helena's parting words hit her in full force. Charlotte tried to push down her rising panic. Logically, she knew that Helena could not have told him anything of great significance. If she had, Duncan would say or do something besides simply sit there looking dazed and upset. *Wouldn't he?*

Chapter 18

“Thank you again, Miss Becker,” Duncan said. He was vaguely aware of Christine’s awkward discomfort as she tried to console him, but he could not offer her much in the way of solace. His mind was too focused on his mother’s words, and Christine and Ruthie’s behavior over the past weeks. He could not rid his mind of terrible thoughts or shake the mood that had overcome him since speaking with his mother.

Christine looked at him, her face full of

concern, and something that Duncan thought might be fear. He could not be certain, however, with his mother's words of warning still ringing in his ears.

“I am happy to help,” she said. “If there is anything further I can do, please ask. You were so good to me when I was ill, and it is the least that I can do.”

Duncan gazed back down at his cup and nodded slowly. He wanted to open up to her about his feelings, and he wanted to

completely disregard his mother's poison, but he was still too confused to know what he should believe. The last thing he wanted was to push Christine away unjustly, but he also did not wish to be deceived. Although he was sure that his mother was the one being vindictive and deceptive, he knew that he must look at all sides of the situation and proceed with caution.

“You are very kind,” he said, more curtly than he intended. “I have everything that I need for now.”

Christine withdrew from him as though his words had stung her, and he felt guilty. However, he could not bring himself to apologize, or to tell her what was on his mind. He found himself utterly unable to express not only his gratitude for Christine's kindness and comfort, but also his pleasure at her sitting so close to him. It was exactly what he had wanted since the very moment he had realized that he was in love with her. However, now that she was there with him, showing him such sweetness and concern, he could not

rejoice. Helena had seen to that.

Helena Lancaster had never approved of the women Duncan showed an interest in, so it came as no surprise to him when she told him that she was suspicious of Christine. It seemed that his mother was always wary of someone, but, this time, something Helena had said made sense. Duncan had noticed, ever since first meeting Christine and Ruthie, that they seemed very nervous and untrusting. At first, Duncan thought it was merely the result of whatever had caused them to attempt to flee

England aboard his cargo crates. As time went on, however, it became clearer that they were hiding something.

That did not stop Duncan from loving Christine. He was sure that she was the beautiful, smart, headstrong, and compassionate person she had shown herself to be. Those were things you could not feign, not with so much sincerity. He felt certain that whatever Christine was hiding could not be terrible enough to change the way he viewed her, but he wouldn't know for sure unless she

confided her secrets in him.

Suddenly, Duncan came up with an idea. He did not want to manipulate Christine, especially since his mother seemed to be doing such a wonderful job of that all on her own. He knew how he felt about Christine and was determined to find out her secrets without his mother's interference.

All at once, Duncan decided that there was one way he could learn that information. All Christine had to do was agree to what he

was about to propose. He knew that the chances were slim, and that he had his mother to blame for that. But that did not stop him from hoping that he was not too late to show Christine how important she was to him.

“My lord?” Christine said, bringing him out of his thoughts. “Is there anything else I can do to help?”

Duncan looked into her beautiful eyes. The sincere concern and affection he saw there melted his heart, and he smiled.

“As a matter of fact, there is,” he said.

“Say that you will meet me this evening for a stroll on the docks.”

Christine blinked, clearly surprised by his request.

“Are you using your distress to force me to spend time with you?” she asked, her lips curving up into a smile.

Duncan shrugged.

“Perhaps,” he said. “But it just so happens that this will be a great help to my disposition, as well.”

Charlotte looked at him thoughtfully. Duncan feared that he was asking too much after her recent illness, and for a moment he considered taking back his request. Then, Christine nodded slowly.

“I think a stroll sounds lovely,” she said.

Duncan sighed with relief.

“I am glad,” he said. “Shall we meet there at about seven o’clock?”

Christine smiled.

“Seven o’clock is perfect,” she said.

“Wonderful,” he said. “Now, just one more thing.”

Christine raised her eyebrow.

“Yet another favor, my lord?” she teased.

Duncan nodded.

“Since it is almost time for you and Ruthie to finish for the day, I wish to escort you to your carriage.”

Christine laughed, and the sound made Duncan’s skin tingle.

“That would be delightful,” she said.

As they walked with Ruthie out of the door and toward the coach, Duncan could not resist taking Christine's hand and giving it a gentle kiss as he bowed. Her eyes lit up, and she blushed. Ruthie averted her gaze, hiding a smile behind her hand.

“Until this evening, Miss Becker,” he said, as he helped her into the carriage.

Duncan watched the coach until he could not see it anymore. He was overjoyed that

Christine had agreed to meet him for a walk, and he had no intention of wasting the opportunity. He determined that he would speak with Christine about her secrets. Once she had told him what she was hiding, he would ask her permission to court her.

At six o'clock, Duncan left for the docks. He knew that he would arrive early, but he was too excited and nervous to wait any longer. As the coach rolled along, he rehearsed what he would say to Christine. He wanted everything to come out just right, so that she

would see how much he loved and trusted her. He needed her to trust him enough to confide in him.

When he arrived at the docks, he was surprised to see that Christine and Ruthie were already there. He saw with great pleasure that Christine was wearing one of the gowns he had given her. The maid was holding Christine's hands, speaking to her with hushed urgency. Duncan hesitated a moment, not wishing to interrupt their conversation. After a moment, Christine looked up and spotted him.

The change in her expression was instant and dramatic. She squeezed Ruthie's hands before releasing them, beaming brightly at him. The way her smile lit up her face made Duncan's heart soar, and he quickly approached them.

“Good evening,” he said, offering his arm to Christine. “Shall we?”

Christine gently took his arm and nodded; her cheeks flushed.

“We shall indeed, my lord,” she said.

The evening was a beautiful one. The breeze from the ocean was pleasant and cool, and the sky was streaked with the colors of the setting sun. In the fading light, Christine's eyes were more beautiful than he had ever seen them. He did not realize that he was staring at her until she smiled at him.

“That is a rather intense gaze,” she said.

Duncan smiled sheepishly.

“I was just wondering at the sunset’s audacity to try to outdo your beauty,” he said.

Christine blushed.

“Did you ask me here merely to flatter me, my lord?” she asked, her eyes twinkling.

Duncan raised his eyebrows.

“Is it working?” he asked.

Christine laughed.

“I believe that it is,” she said.

Duncan felt an overwhelming surge of love for her, and he stopped walking. When Christine followed suit, he took her hands in his.

“Truthfully, there is a different reason I invited you here,” he said. His heart was pounding, and he was more nervous than he had ever been in his life.

Christine looked surprised, but she gently squeezed his hands, rather than pulling hers free from his grasp. Duncan felt encouraged by the gesture, and he took a deep breath.

“Christine, I love you,” he said. “I asked you here because I wanted to ask to court you.”

Christine and Ruthie gasped simultaneously. Christine studied him for several moments, and Duncan was suddenly sure that she would reject him and flee. Each

second that Christine remained silent stretched into an eternity, and Duncan held his breath. Christine glanced at Ruthie, who was now standing right behind them. The maid gave Christine a pointed look, and Christine gave her an almost imperceptible nod. Then, she turned back to Duncan with a smile.

“Yes,” she said, biting her lip.

Duncan stared at her, unsure if he had heard her correctly.

“Yes?” he echoed.

Christine bit her lip and nodded.

“Yes,” she repeated. “But I have one condition.”

Duncan laughed with relief and joy. If it meant that she said yes, he would do anything she asked.

“Of course,” he said. “Just name it.”

Christine took a deep breath, seeming to brace herself.

“There are some things that you must know about me first,” she said. “And I must discuss those things with you before we begin a courtship.”

Duncan nodded emphatically.

“Of course,” he said. “I am more than willing to hear anything you have to say.”

Christine smiled gratefully.

“Thank you,” she said.

Duncan kissed her hand, his heart full of joy.

“How about we talk tomorrow evening over dinner at my home?” he asked.

Christine smiled and nodded.

“That sounds perfect,” she said.

Chapter 19

“Oh, my,” Charlotte said, when she and Ruth got back to their room at the inn. “What on earth have I gotten myself into?”

Ruth put her hands on her shoulders.

“You have agreed to a courtship with a duke,” she said, her eyes shining. “And you have finally decided to tell him the truth about everything, so that the two of you can

be happy together.”

Charlotte sighed, her emotions a flurry of confusion. She was thrilled that Duncan wished to court her, and she loved him every bit as much as he loved her, but she was also terrified. He had gladly agreed to hear what she had to say, but that did not mean that he would still want her when she told him the truth.

“Oh, Ruth,” she said. “I do want to tell him everything, but I could not bear it if he

felt so betrayed that he did not want to see me again.”

Ruth guided her to the bed and sat down on the edge of it with her.

“You are fretting too much,” she said.

“And once again, you are underestimating Lord Willetton.”

Charlotte shook her head.

“No,” she said. “I am imagining how I

would feel if someone deceived me as I have deceived him. I would be horrified and devastated. I certainly would never want to set eyes on them ever again.”

Ruth nodded.

“I understand why you are thinking this way,” she said, “but you must have faith. He has fallen in love with you, not your name. If a name is of that much importance to him, then perhaps it is best if the two of you don’t begin courting.”

Charlotte looked at Ruth with wide, fearful eyes.

“I do not think I can go through with this,” she said.

Ruth took her hands and gave her a serious look.

“You must,” she said. “You will never have a better opportunity than this, and he deserves to know the truth.”

Charlotte lowered her head. She knew that Ruth was right. She had allowed the deceit to go on long enough. It weighed on her more with each passing day, and Helena was not making the problem any better. Charlotte was still unsure of whether the woman knew anything definitive or if she was bluffing, but she did know that she must tell Duncan everything first. It must be she who told Duncan, not his mother.

Charlotte took a deep breath and nodded.

“You are right, of course,” she said,
looking at her maid. “I will tell him everything
at dinner tomorrow night.”

Ruth clapped her hands and embraced
Charlotte.

“I am so proud of you,” she said.
“Everything will be alright. You’ll see.”

* * *

The following day, Duncan had meetings that kept him in town all day. Charlotte used the time to think of exactly how she would tell Duncan her real identity. She rehearsed her words repeatedly in her head, trying to make herself feel confident enough to say what needed to be said. In truth, however, she was still very nervous. Duncan's reaction to her words would dramatically change her life, no matter which way he felt about them. If he were hurt and angry, he would terminate her employment, and perhaps even have her put in jail. If Ruth were right, and he was

understanding and accepting, and still wished to court her, she would likely spend the rest of her life with him. Both possibilities were equally nerve-racking.

Before she knew it, the workday was over, and it was time for Charlotte and Ruth to return to the inn and dress for dinner. They had opted to walk to work, and Charlotte was now grateful for their decision. She would have the opportunity to seek strength and support from Ruth before she had to face Duncan.

“Are you ready?” Ruth asked, as they walked from the manor.

Charlotte shook her head slowly.

“No,” she said. “But I’ve been preparing myself all day.”

Ruth patted her arm.

“Everything will be fine,” she said, echoing her sentiments from the previous

evening. “After today there will be no more guilt.”

Charlotte nodded.

“Yes,” she said, allowing herself to feel a shred of relief at that prospect. “And there will be nothing more Helena can say to make me miserable.”

Ruth clapped.

“Exactly,” she said excitedly. “If you feel

yourself having doubts about speaking, recall these thoughts. I will sit right beside you at the table, in case, you need my support.”

Charlotte smiled gratefully and hugged her friend.

“Thank you, Ruth,” she said.

Before the women could begin walking again, a blur of movement caught Charlotte’s attention. She looked over her shoulder and saw a man staring at them. He was standing

some distance away, so that Charlotte could not see his face clearly, but a feeling of great unease settled in her stomach.

Ruth saw her concerned expression and touched her shoulder.

“What is it?” she asked, trying to follow Charlotte’s gaze.

Charlotte shook her head.

“We should walk more quickly,” she said,

striding briskly ahead.

Ruth followed behind her, still trying to see what had caused Charlotte to react.

Charlotte took her arm and pulled her closer as they walked.

“I cannot be sure,” she said, speaking quietly since they were entering an area where other people were walking and milling about. “But I believe that someone is following us.”

Ruth sighed heavily.

“Are you sure you are not being paranoid?” she asked.

Charlotte glanced at her friend but did not stop walking.

“No,” she said. “I am not sure at all, but I have a terrible feeling.”

Ruth shook her head in exasperation and glanced behind them again.

“I don’t see . . .,” she trailed off. She covered her mouth with her hand, causing Charlotte to stop again and turn around.

“Oh no,” Charlotte said. “That is Benjamin Paul. He lives not far from my father’s estate.”

Ruth nodded, stunned into silence. Of course, he would recognize them. They had lived in the same part of town for their entire lives.

Just then, Benjamin noticed that Charlotte had spotted him. He lifted his hand, continuing to approach the women. He was wearing a dock worker's clothes. If he worked at the docks, it was by sheer luck that he did not spot them the day Duncan found them. Or had he?

“Lady Charlotte?” he called.

Charlotte grabbed Ruth's hand, her heart threatening to pound out of her chest.

“Run,” she said.

The women ran, trying to lose themselves among the other pedestrians, so that Benjamin would lose sight of them. However, when she glanced back, she could see that he was also running, following not far behind them. Worse still, people were starting to take notice of the fleeing women, talking amongst themselves and staring at them. Charlotte struggled to contain her rising panic. The last thing they needed was to continue attracting attention, but she could not let Benjamin catch them.

Just then, she felt a hard tug on her hand. Ruth was pulling her toward a space between two buildings. She glanced back, unable to see more than the top of Benjamin's head. She realized that they only had fractions of a second to act before they were in his view once more. She looked at Ruth and nodded, and they squeezed into the narrow space. They walked as far back as they could manage, keeping an eye on the opening. Ruth put her hands over her mouth and gestured for Charlotte to do the same, just as Benjamin

trotted in front of their hiding spot. He was looking everywhere, and Charlotte realized that he simply believed he had lost sight of them. After the longest few moments of Charlotte's life, Benjamin turned around and began walking back the other way. However, even with him out of sight, Charlotte was not comfortable leaving their hiding space right away. Instead, she stood completely motionless for several moments. She felt dizzy and could hear the blood rushing in her ears.

Once she slowed her racing heart, she

motioned for Ruth to stay where she was. She tiptoed to the narrow alleyway's entrance and cautiously peeked around the corner, in the direction that Benjamin had gone. To her relief, he was nowhere in sight. Only then did she allow herself to relax a little.

Once the crowd of people that were approaching their hiding spot had passed, she came out. Ruth followed hesitantly. Charlotte looked at Ruth, who still looked flustered and afraid. Then, Ruth's face paled, more so than before. Charlotte quickly realized that Ruth

was looking behind her, not at her. With her heart in her throat, she slowly turned around. Standing in front of the next building over was Helena Lancaster, her gaze fixed on Charlotte and Ruth.

Ruth pulled on Charlotte's hand again, but Charlotte was too shocked to move. All she could do was stare dumbly as Helena approached the women, wearing a rather smug smirk.

“What luck,” Helena said, her voice

dripping with sugar. “I was looking for you.”

Charlotte tried to swallow, but her mouth was dry. She still had not recovered from the shock of being chased by Benjamin, and now she had to face Helena. She took a deep breath and tried to make herself look braver and more composed than she felt.

“What luck, indeed,” Charlotte said, trying to give Helena a smile. She was furious, especially since she knew that Helena had no real reason to be looking for her. But after

what had just happened, and with her planning to tell Duncan everything in just a couple of hours, Charlotte knew it would serve her best to be polite. She did not know if Helena had seen her fleeing from Benjamin, but it would not do for her to upset the woman and allow her to go to Duncan first.

Helena's smirk grew. It was clear that she took pleasure in Charlotte's discomfort.

"I trust that you have not forgotten what we discussed the last time we met," she said.

Charlotte strained to widen her smile.

“No, my lady, I have not,” she said.

Helena nodded. The smugness of her expression made Charlotte’s blood hot, but she resisted the urge to say anything hasty to her.

“Oh, really?” Helena asked, looking intently at Charlotte. “Then why did you agree to have a private, intimate dinner with my son?”

Charlotte clenched her teeth together.

Helena Lancaster had more audacity than any person she had ever met in her life, and she found herself wishing, not for the first time, that she would disappear and never resurface.

“I would hardly call a dinner between two employees and their employer an intimate affair,” Charlotte countered.

Helena laughed.

“Then what would you call it?” she asked. “I assume that you would give it a brand-new name. A new identity if you will.”

Charlotte blanched. That statement told her with absolute certainty that Helena must know something damning, but Charlotte still refused to give her any satisfaction.

“What I call it is accepting a kind invitation from my employer, extended to both myself and my good friend,” she said.

Helena laughed once more.

“Your friend, indeed,” she said dryly.

Charlotte’s patience finally snapped.

“My lady,” she said, her voice shaky but determined. “If you have something you wish to say, or something you think you know, you are certainly free to say such things to my face.”

Helena feigned surprise, which only

made Charlotte angrier.

“Why, I am sure that I have no idea what you are talking about,” she said. “I simply wanted you to know that, if you are lying to my son, you will not get away with it for long.”

Charlotte silently cursed herself for letting her emotions get the better of her. Helena’s next words came as no surprise.

“However, if you are feeling guilty of

something, you would do well to come clean now,” the woman said, surveying Charlotte and Ruth with cold satisfaction.

Charlotte shook her head firmly. She was going to tell Duncan the truth soon enough. There was no reason why she needed to give Helena what she wanted.

“I can assure you, there is nothing that you need to know,” Charlotte said, some of her confidence returning.

Helena burst into laughter, and the sound chilled Charlotte's bones. Whatever information she possessed, she had full confidence in it, and that did not bode well for Charlotte and Ruth.

"I cannot help but disagree," Helena said. "You have been sufficiently warned. If you continue to ignore my warnings, you will rue the day that you met my son."

Charlotte stared at Helena. Had Helena gotten to Duncan already? Was she too late?

With a firm shake of her head, Charlotte smiled bitterly at Duncan's mother.

“What I know is that I shall never regret meeting Lord Willetton,” she said. “And that Ruth and I are late for our dinner engagement with him.”

Without waiting for another response from Helena, Charlotte took Ruth's hand and brushed disrespectfully past the woman. She continued to storm off without looking back,

determined not to let Helena see how badly she had shaken them. Let her believe what she likes, Charlotte thought. After tonight, she will have nothing to hold against us.

Chapter 20

Duncan paced in the entryway of his home, checking his pocket watch anxiously. Christine and Ruthie were late, and he worried that Christine had changed her mind. He had also extended an invitation to his mother, with the hopes that, if she got to know Christine a little better, she would be less cruel and bitter toward her. However, Helena, in her infinite predictability, declined the invitation. Deep down, Duncan was relieved. He could see from Christine's reactions to his mother that she made Christine very nervous and

uncomfortable.

Dinner was already prepared and ready to be served, and he had included a special dessert and wine. Even though Christine would be bringing Ruthie along, it was still a special evening, and a rare opportunity to be alone with Christine.

A knock brought him out of his reverie. Duncan brushed past the butler to open the door himself. He sighed with relief when he saw Christine and Ruthie standing on the

other side. Christine looked so radiant and beautiful that, for a moment, he forgot Ruthie's presence. She took his breath away, and he could not wait to officially announce their courtship.

“Good evening, ladies,” he said, taking Christine's hand and kissing it. “I was starting to become worried about you.”

Christine smiled, but it was strained.

“Please, forgive us,” she said. “We had

something of a delay on our way back to the inn.”

Duncan frowned, seeing how distressed the women looked.

“Is everything alright?” he asked, as he led them inside.

“It was nothing that we could not handle,” Christine said. “We are just glad it is over, and that we are here to have a wonderful evening.”

At this, both Ruthie and Christine smiled, more warmly and sincerely than before.

Duncan nodded, deciding not to press the issue. If they had a bad experience, he wanted to put them at ease, not force them to explain what had happened. He returned their smiles and bowed.

“Well,” he said, using all his charm. “You certainly came to the right place for a wonderful evening. Right this way.”

Duncan led the women into the dining room, where the servants were already serving the meal. He nodded to one of the lingering servants, who pulled out a seat for Ruthie, while he approached the seat nearest his and offered it to Christine. Once the women were comfortable, he took his seat at the head of the table. He intended to make this dinner last as long as he possibly could, so he reached for his glass of wine and raised it to Christine.

“Before we eat,” he said. “I wanted to thank you for accepting my invitation.”

Christine blushed and smiled impishly.

“Do you mean your invitation for dinner, or your offer of courtship?” she asked.

Duncan flushed, unable to hide his own exuberant smile.

“Let us just say that I am referring to both,” he said.

Ruthie giggled and raised her own glass.

“If I may, my lord,” she said, looking sheepishly at Duncan for permission to continue.

“Of course, Ruthie,” he said warmly.
“Please, speak freely. You are among friends here.”

Ruthie blushed more deeply, and her smile widened.

“I would like to thank you for being so

good to us,” she said. “We have been so happy working for you, and we love it here.”

Duncan laughed. He knew how happy the women were in his employ, but it brought him joy to hear them express their pleasure in such a direct manner. Especially Ruthie. He had discovered early on that she was very timid, and she rarely spoke more than a few words at one time. He was glad that she was warming to him just as much as Christine was.

He raised his glass to hers and grinned.

“I am truly honored by your words, Ruthie,” he said. “I cannot tell you how much of a pleasure it has been, the two of you being here.” He nodded to Ruthie, then turned his attention to Christine. “So, the feeling is more than mutual.”

Ruthie giggled again, and Christine’s blush deepened. The lightness of the atmosphere and the sweet words brought a sparkle to her eyes that melted Duncan’s heart, and he took a sip of wine to stop himself from

leaving his seat and giving her a sweet, chaste kiss. Her sheepishly averted gaze and sudden attention to her wine glass told him that she might have wished for the same thing.

At last, Duncan put down his glass and picked up his fork. The women followed suit, and they ate in silence for a few moments. He knew that they were there for Christine to tell him her secret, but he did not wish to pressure her. He wanted her to continue feeling comfortable and to open up to him at her own pace. At one point, he caught a shared look

between Christine and Ruthie. Before he looked away to avoid spying on their silent cues, he saw Ruthie nod her head slightly and give Christine a small, warm smile. The suspense was fierce, and he took a long sip from his wine glass to keep from saying something that would add to Christine's stress.

To his relief, a few minutes later, Christine put down her cutlery and looked at him. Her face was tense and serious, and Duncan's heart fell a little. He could not imagine what she could have to say that

would make her so concerned, but he decided that no matter what it was, he was going to be loving and supportive. He loved her with all his heart, and he would do anything to prove that love to her.

“My lord,” she began. Duncan lifted his hand, giving her a warm, sweet smile.

“In light of the fact that we may soon begin courting,” he said. “I really would love it if you called me by my given name.”

Christine blushed once more and nodded.

“Very well, Duncan,” she said, her expression unreadable.

“Yes, Christine?” he asked. He wanted to show her the same familiarity, so that she understood how close he felt to her, and how much he trusted her.

“As I said before, I wanted to come here because I have a few things I must tell you,” she continued.

Duncan put down his own silverware and focused all his attention on Christine.

“Please, feel free to say anything that is on your mind,” he said, keeping his face warm, open, and kind.

Christine looked at him for a moment, taking in his expression. He was glad to see that her shoulders relaxed, if only marginally, and she gave him a small smile.

“I hope that you still feel the same way in a few moments,” she said.

Duncan nodded, keeping his expression exactly the same.

“I can promise you that I will,” he said.

She took a deep breath and nodded.

“The first thing that you should know is that I love you. As my friend just said, I have never been happier in my life.”

Duncan nodded again, his heart pounding in his chest. Before she could continue, however, there was a loud crash at the front door. Duncan jumped from his seat and whipped his head toward the dining room door. Christine and Ruthie looked at each other with wild eyes, and Duncan prepared to rush to the front of the house and locate the cause of the trouble. Before he could leave the table, the dining room door was thrust open. There, in the doorway, stood two constables, and just behind them was his mother. Duncan

knocked over his wine glass, hardly taking notice of the mess as the two men charged into the dining area.

“What is the meaning of this?” Duncan bellowed. Even as he spoke, the men barged in, one moving toward Christine and the other going for Ruthie. Duncan stared, shocked, as the men restrain the women.

“Forgive us, my lord,” one of the men said. “But these two women are under arrest.”

Duncan finally found his legs. He left his spot at the table and moved toward the officer who was holding Christine.

“You have made a terrible mistake,” he said, reaching toward the officer. “If you will release her and talk with me, I am sure that we can clear up the misunderstanding.”

The officer refused to release Christine. He proceeded to handcuff her, only pausing to look at Duncan once he had completed his task.

“I am afraid not, my lord,” he said. “We have spoken to Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of Lancaster.”

Duncan felt the color drain from his face. What had his mother done now?

“Is that so?” he asked, his blood immediately boiling. “And what did the duchess have to say?”

“These two women are imposters,” the

other officer said bluntly. “They have given you false names and identities.”

Duncan’s heart fell into his stomach. He shook his head numbly, trying to make sense of what was happening.

“I do not understand,” he said. “They are a simple lady and her maid and companion.”

The officer arresting Christine chuckled dryly.

“Unfortunately, that is not the case,” he said. Duncan stared at him, awaiting further explanation, but none came.

“Please, Duncan, let us explain,” Christine said. The officer gripping her arm squeezed it and looked at her.

“Silence,” he said. “You are under arrest.”

Duncan leapt forward, reaching for Christine. Whatever was happening, he

wanted to hear it from her lips, not from those of a policeman. However, the officer yanked her back and looked Duncan in the eyes.

“Please, my lord, address us directly from here onwards; these two will only tell you more lies” he said.

Duncan was furious.

“This is my home,” he said. “And I will address anyone I wish.”

The second officer shook his head sheepishly.

“These two women cannot be trusted,” he said. “The duchess told us that they have been on the run for quite some time, and that nothing they say is truthful. You would do well to speak to us, rather than them.”

Duncan looked from the officers to the two women, bewildered. What was happening? Were the men speaking the truth? Did this have anything to do with what

Christine was trying to tell him?

“Very well,” Duncan said, deciding to play along in the hopes of finding a resolution that would involve the officers releasing the women. “Then tell me who they are and their crimes.”

The officer holding Christine seemed to relax and loosened his grip on her, and Duncan gave an imperceptible sigh of relief. He stood up straight and met Duncan’s gaze.

“This woman here,” he said, pointing to Christine, “is actually Lady Charlotte Hackney. She was supposed to be married to Comte Francois, in France, but she evaded her obligation by assuming a false identity. That woman is her lady’s maid, Ruth Simmons.”

Duncan shook his head.

“And how, may I ask, did the duchess obtain such reliable information?” he asked, his voice full of sarcasm.

The first officer straightened his shoulders and looked at him.

“She said that she spoke to a man on the docks who recognized the women,” he said.

“The gentleman has known Lady Charlotte for many years and would recognize her anywhere.”

Duncan laughed.

“And a strange man’s word is your sole basis for this arrest?” he asked.

The officers looked at him solemnly.

“He is willing to identify Lady Charlotte and Ruth Simmons,” he said. “We must follow up on this, especially as the duchess is making an official report.”

Duncan looked at his mother, bewildered, hoping for any explanation that would clear up the chaotic situation. Instead of speaking, however, she stood with her arms folded across her chest, and the ugliest, most

triumphant smile spread across her face.

Duncan began trembling, both from anger and fear. He still did not understand what he was hearing, and he wanted answers that made sense. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself enough to determine the truth and reach an agreement with the officers.

Deep in his heart, he knew that the situation was more than just a misunderstanding, but he wanted to hear Christine's side, so that he could properly judge the charges against her.

“Very well,” he said, looking back and forth between the officers. “As this is *my* home, and *I* am the one who decides what will happen to these women, I wish to hear the full story, and from their point of view. Otherwise, I will not allow you to take them from this house. Is that understood?”

Helena opened her mouth to protest, but Duncan held up his hand, glaring at his mother.

“I request that my mother be removed

from the room until I deem it an appropriate time for her to rejoin us,” he said.

“But my lord—,” one officer began.

Duncan turned his burning gaze onto him.

“This is my house,” he repeated. “You will do as I request, or you will face the consequences.”

The officers looked at one another, knowing well that Duncan was correct. At last, the one holding Christine, or whoever she

really was, nodded.

“Yes, my lord,” he said meekly.

Chapter 21

Charlotte felt as though the floor had fallen away from beneath her, as the officer held her firmly in place. She wished that it had, when she saw that the officer had only escorted the duchess to the open doorway, not out of the room. Over his shoulder, Helena flashed her a hideous, triumphant smile.

Duncan looked frantically between her and Ruth, and her heart broke. She would have given anything to spare him the nasty scene that was now unfolding, that would be

forever branded in his mind. She cursed herself for being too weak and frightened to tell him the truth sooner. She closed her eyes in a vain attempt to make it all go away, hoping that she would wake up in a cold sweat in her bed at the inn.

“Mother,” Duncan said. Charlotte opened her eyes, crashing back to reality. “What have you done? Leave here and take these officers with you at once. These women have done nothing wrong.”

Helena's face twisted into a mask of sympathy and she touched her son's arm.

“Oh, darling,” she said, her voice dripping with such false concern that it made Charlotte want to scream. “I wish, for your sake, that were true.” Helena then turned her attention to Charlotte, her smug expression returning. “As for you, I warned you to come clean. I told you what would happen if you did not.”

Duncan blinked and looked at Charlotte

with wide-eyed surprise.

“What is she talking about, Christine?”

he asked softly.

Helena laughed maniacally at his use of her fake name.

“My lord,” the officer detaining Charlotte said. “This woman is not . . .”

“Silence,” Duncan said, his voice quiet but firm. “This is my home, these are my

guests, and you have not been invited. I will speak to whomever I wish.”

The officer clearly wanted to protest, but he was standing before a duke, and eventually decided against it. He bowed, keeping Charlotte’s hands firmly behind her back.

Duncan noticed how the officer was holding her and took a step toward them.

“Furthermore,” he said. “You will release your grip on these women and allow them to

sit, like civilized people, while we discuss this.”

This time, the second officer did protest.

“I am afraid we cannot do that,” he said.

Duncan held up his hand.

“You are in the home of a duke,” he said.

Charlotte noticed that he winced a little at using his title and power so freely, and her heart filled with more love for him. “I am not

asking you to free them. I am telling you that you will allow them to be seated comfortably while they explain what is happening. You may stand behind them, if you wish, but you will stop holding onto them as though they pose some sort of danger.”

The officers exchanged a look. Then the first officer nodded, and they each released their grip on the women’s wrists. They simultaneously pulled out chairs at the table and eased the women into them. Only then did they let go of their arms, but they did not

move a single step away from the seats.

Once the women were seated, Duncan took another step toward Charlotte. He was looking at her with wary, but kind eyes. Her own filled with tears, and she had to force herself to hold his gaze.

“I am so sorry,” she whispered, biting her lip to stifle a sob.

Duncan touched her hand, but the officer behind her put out a hand and touched

Duncan's wrist.

“I am afraid that I cannot allow you to touch the prisoners,” he said.

Duncan's face flushed with anger, and Charlotte feared that he might swat away the officer's hand. However, he merely withdrew his hand and knelt to look her in the eye.

“What has happened?” he asked softly.

“Please, just tell me.”

Charlotte did sob this time at the warmth of his tone. She was suddenly sure that, had she only told him sooner, he would have remained as sweet and kind as he was now. After all this, she did not believe he would ever forgive her.

“Your mother is right,” she said, her voice still a whisper. “I am not who I said I am.”

Duncan blinked again, confused.

“I do not understand,” he said. “What does that mean?”

“It means that she is a filthy liar,” Helena said, interrupting. “She is not to be trusted.”

Duncan glowered at his mother.

“I believe that you have done more than enough, Mother,” he hissed, his eyes flashing. “You will remain silent and let her speak, or you will be the next person to be removed from here in handcuffs.”

Even Helena seemed to be temporarily frightened by the threat. She stepped back without another word.

“It is alright,” Charlotte said, trying to find her voice. “Your mother’s words are not too far from the truth.”

Duncan shook his head. Charlotte flinched at the pain clouding his expression.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

Charlotte sighed, bracing herself. She had been ready to tell Duncan who she was, but she could have never prepared to do so under such circumstances.

“My name is not Christine Becker,” she said. “It is Charlotte Hackney. My friend is my life-long lady’s maid, Ruth Simmons.”

Duncan stared at her dumbly. She could see him trying to process what she was saying. Suddenly, recognition and realization dawned

on his face. He paled and looked ill.

“Do you mean Charlotte Hackney, as in the daughter of Lord Devon?” he asked.

Charlotte nodded slowly, fresh tears filling her eyes.

“I am so sorry,” she whispered.

Duncan turned his back to her, and she started to panic. Her worst fear was realized, and she was desperate to explain everything to

him.

“Duncan, please,” she said. “It is not what you think. If you will just grant me the chance to explain.

Duncan spun around and narrowed his tear-filled eyes at her.

“Enough,” he said. “There is nothing you have to say that I wish to hear.”

The harshness of his typically warm and

affectionate voice stung her, and she let out a sob.

“Please,” she begged, but Duncan tore his gaze from her.

“Take them,” he said, gesturing to the officers. “Be sure to notify Lord Devon of his daughter’s whereabouts. ”

At Duncan’s words, Charlotte felt as though the breath had been knocked out of her. She went limp, further pleas dying on her

lips. She would have collapsed, if not for the officer's firm grip returning and lifting her from the seat. Her head fell, but from the corner of her vision, she could see Helena Lancaster smirking. Charlotte was too wounded to feel anything but sadness, and she refused to look at the woman's face, as the officers escorted her and Ruth from Duncan's estate.

The ride from Duncan's was the longest and quietest of Charlotte's life. In many ways, it reminded her of the day she left her home to

board the ship to France. She closed her eyes, wishing fervently that she had never chosen to hide her identity. However, even after the horror of the evening, the one thing she did not regret was meeting Duncan, or any moment she had spent with him. Her only regret was that he never wished to see her again.

Charlotte and Ruth's wait in a locked room was just as silent as the carriage ride, and colder than the early spring night. The officers signed papers and talked amongst

themselves, without saying a single word to the women. Charlotte overheard her father's name, and she had to close her eyes, to make the room stop spinning.

Ruth touched her gently, and for the first time since the officers had arrested them, she looked at her maid. Ruth looked as distraught as she felt, and she let out another sob.

“Oh, Ruth,” she said. “I am so very sorry. Please forgive me.”

Ruth's lip trembled, and she embraced Charlotte.

“You are not to blame,” she whispered. Her voice, though terrified, sounded completely sincere, but Charlotte knew it was not true. This situation was most certainly her fault because it had been her idea to hide their identities.

“You are too good to me,” Charlotte said, her voice thick with tears.

“It was the duchess who did this,” Ruth said, as though reading Charlotte’s thoughts. “If not for her, you would have told Lord Willeton everything, and we would not be here.”

Charlotte choked out a laugh, replaying Duncan’s reaction and words in her mind.

“I am not so sure,” she said.

* * *

Charlotte and Ruth were stirred awake the next morning by the rattling of keys in the door. Charlotte started, suddenly realizing where they were. As she saw an officer and her father's cold, angry expression, everything came rushing back. She rose slowly and approached the opening door with caution.

“You are both free to go,” the officer said, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor.

Charlotte looked back at Ruth, who was slowly moving to join her. As soon as they

were out of the room, Charlotte put a gentle hand on her father's arm.

“Father,” she said.

The earl did not look at his daughter or react to her touch. He began to walk briskly toward the front of the station. Charlotte and Ruth followed quickly behind, knowing better than to agitate him further. None of them spoke, until the carriage pulled away from the building.

Just as Charlotte began to feel that the tense silence might swallow her whole, her father began to speak.

“You are a disgrace, Charlotte,” he said, his voice low but full of anger.

Charlotte looked at her father, trying not to flinch from the fury in his eyes.

“Father, I am sorry,” she said, her voice trembling. “Please, you must understand . . .”

“You presume to attempt to explain yourself to me now?” he asked, his voice rising. “What on earth could justify such behavior from a lady of your status? What could be a good enough reason to create such a scandal for your family?”

Charlotte stared at the earl, wounded by his words, but unsurprised.

“Scandal,” she said quietly. “Is that what most concerns you?”

“You presented yourself as a poor girl,” he said, his face reddening. “To a well-respected duke and duchess, no less. I should think that you would be more concerned about causing such a scandal yourself.”

Charlotte did flinch at the mention of Duncan. Truthfully, losing him was the only thing she cared about. It did not matter if she lived the rest of her days as a social outcast. If she did not have Duncan, she had no intention of showing her face in public ever again.

“I suppose I should have gone ahead and married a man as sophisticated and upstanding as the Comte?” she snapped sarcastically. Her father narrowed his eyes at her, and she knew she should not have been so brazen. Nevertheless, her heart was too heavy and her mind too ill at ease for her to regret her bold remark.

“Yes, the Comte,” her father said bitterly. “I imagine you have squandered that opportunity, as well. If he has not already discovered what has happened, he will

certainly be furious once he does.”

Charlotte sighed with exasperation.

“He has the bride he sought,” she said.

“And he is surely wed to her by now. Why must he know anything?”

“He does not have the bride he sought,” her father hissed. “He has the daughter of a lowly baron, which is an affront to a man of his station. Did you really think that you would get away with this?”

Charlotte did not answer. She had suspected from the first day that she would be discovered, but she did not wish to admit that to her father and give him more reason to ridicule her.

The earl shook his head, and for a moment he looked sad. Charlotte allowed herself to hope that he would take pity on her, that her place as his daughter would take precedence over his concern about a scandal. Then, he shook his head and looked away

from Charlotte, his jaw tight.

“I will write to the Comte as soon as we arrive back in Plymouth,” he said, his voice once again low, but every bit as angry.

Charlotte’s heart sank. Had Christine already wed the Comte? Had he learned of their deception and postponed his wedding plans until he found Charlotte? After everything, she was once more facing the destiny she had tried so wildly to escape. She prayed silently for the rest of the journey to

Plymouth, begging for any future that did not result in her marrying Comte Francois. Any fate, she felt certain, was better than being wed to that horrid man.

Chapter 22

Duncan collapsed in his dining room chair, as the two women he thought he knew so well were escorted out of his home. He stared at the food that had hardly been touched, barely recognizing it. His mind was reeling as he tried to make sense of everything that had transpired.

He did not even realize that he was not alone until he felt a cold, bony hand on his shoulder.

“I am so sorry, Duncan,” his mother said.

Even in his distressed state, he could hear the satisfaction dripping from his mother’s voice. He flinched away from her touch, saying nothing.

“Darling,” she continued, in her *faux* caring tone. “I wanted more than anything to resolve this differently. I did not wish for you to have to experience such shame.”

Those words sparked Duncan to life. He

jumped from his chair and whirled to face his mother.

“That is the crux of this for you, isn’t it?” he hissed. “The shame that this could bring to our family. To you.”

Helena put her hand to her chest, appearing wounded by her son’s words. Duncan saw right through her act, but all he could do was stand there and stare at her in disbelief.

“That is not true at all,” Helena said. “I care about you, and I see how much pain you are in.”

Duncan shook his head.

“Stop, Mother,” he said. “Spare me the theatrics. If you cared at all about my feelings, you would have avoided causing such a hurtful scene tonight. You would have done anything except what you did.”

Helena maintained her sympathetic, hurt

expression.

“Don’t you think that I tried?” she asked.

“Don’t you think that I did my best to rectify the situation before it led to this?”

Duncan laughed dryly.

“Oh, I believe you tried a great deal,” he said. “But I do not think that you did any of the right things. Furthermore, I believe you know that.”

Helena beckoned for one of the servants to bring them some wine. Duncan was furious at his mother's audacity, but he felt that a drink might soothe his nerves. His mother's presence, however, was doing him no favors.

"Duncan, darling," his mother said as the servant brought them the wine. "I really did try to give that young woman every opportunity to tell you the truth."

Duncan paused in the middle of drinking. He looked at his mother with wide, angry

eyes.

“Are you telling me that you knew all this time?” he asked. “Why did you speak so cryptically, instead of telling me outright?”

Helena shook her head indulgently.

“No,” she soothed. “I only had my suspicions until tonight. I came to you as soon as I knew the full truth.”

Duncan laughed dryly.

“Yes, and what a spectacle that was,” he said. “Did you truly feel that involving the constables was better than telling me in private?”

Helena gave her son another sad smile.

“I could not risk her overhearing our conversation and attempting to poison your mind with more lies,” she said. “Or worse, evading justice.”

Duncan shook his head. His mother never ceased to surprise him, and always in the most hurtful way.

“I would have been satisfied with banishing her and her maid from my home,” he said. “There was no need to turn it into an event that will have all of London gossiping for the foreseeable future.”

Helena smiled at Duncan, in a way he assumed was supposed to be warm and caring, but the look did not reach her eyes. Duncan

thought that a mask could show more warmth, and he looked away in disgust.

“Perhaps we can make the best of this,” she said. Her tone began to sound more natural again, and Duncan was instantly suspicious.

“How might we do that?” Duncan snapped.

Helena sipped her wine, seemingly oblivious to her son’s wariness.

“Well, consider all the ladies who will think that what that young woman did was despicable, and will feel sympathy for you for falling victim to such malicious deceit.”

Duncan stared at his mother, genuinely bewildered. Even for Helena Lancaster, this was a new level of manipulation and conniving.

He was unsure what was worse; the fact that his mother had been right about a woman

using him for the first time in his life, or that she was going to use the scandal to her advantage.

Perhaps he was reading things wrongly, and his mother was simply trying, in her selfish fashion, to lift his spirits. However, her words had the opposite effect. Even if she thought she was trying to help, he knew she was up to something, and he was in no mood for another of her schemes. He rose from his seat and gestured for his mother to do the same.

“I think you should go, Mother,” he said.

Helena looked at him, once more
feigning a wounded expression.

“I only wish to help you, Duncan,” she
said.

Duncan tightened his jaw and shook his
head.

“You have done more than enough,” he

said, his voice low. "I want to be alone now, so I bid you goodnight."

Helena stepped toward Duncan with her arm outstretched. Duncan held up his hand, preventing his mother from touching him.

"I said *goodnight*, Mother," he said, raising his voice just loudly enough for the butler to overhear. Before Helena could object further, he turned away from her and went to his study.

Once inside his office, he walked to his liquor cabinet and pulled out the bottle of brandy. He grabbed a tumbler from the silver tray sitting atop the nearby table and filled it with the amber liquid. He sat down at his desk gently to keep from spilling it all over himself or on the papers sitting neatly on his desk.

As he looked for a spot to set down the glass, he glanced over the perfectly stacked pages and neatly arranged items on the desk. His heart squeezed as he recalled how hard Christine had worked to keep his office tidy.

He gave himself a shake, reminding himself that her name was Charlotte, not Christine, and his anger returned. Once more he found himself in disbelief that his mother had been right.

He had defended Charlotte to Helena, nearly destroying his relationship, such as it was, with his mother. He had even taken Charlotte into his home when she had fallen ill that night at the theater.

With sudden, heavy realization, it occurred to him that she had likely not been ill. She had looked as though she had seen a ghost, and Duncan finally understood that she had probably seen someone who knew her real identity. *More deception*, he thought bitterly.

He took a long drink from his glass. He was still trying his best to discover Christine's motivation for lying to him. She had not been seeking him out that day on the docks. She had been trying to sneak aboard a ship. She

had no idea who he was until he had introduced himself. Or had she?

Duncan thought back to an earlier conversation with his mother when she had tried to tell him about Christine's deception. Duncan had dismissed the accusation, because it was not the first time Helena had made it about a woman.

However, in light of the web of lies in which Charlotte had been caught, Duncan had to face the real possibility that his mother was

right. The only reason that a woman like Christine would have for creating such an elaborate deception was that she was after his fortune.

Tears filled Duncan's eyes, as he prepared for bed that evening. He did not expect to get any sleep, but he would be glad for the comfort of his bed.

Before he lay down, however, he gave the butler strict instructions. Until further notice, none of the household staff was to

welcome any guests into his home, including his mother. Especially his mother.

Until he could compose himself and recover from the terrible and painful events of the evening and from the hurt that Christine had inflicted upon him, he would not see anyone. If his business ventures suffered as a result, so be it. He could not bring himself to feel or care about anything except the terrible, aching hole that Christine had left in his heart.

Chapter 23

The ride back to her childhood home in Plymouth was one of the longest of her life. Her father remained stoically silent, and the atmosphere inside the coach was the coldest she had ever known. She dared to glance at Ruth a few times but felt so guilty that she found it nearly impossible to maintain eye contact with her maid.

Charlotte felt a surge of mixed emotions,

as the carriage stopped in front of the house. If she was honest with herself, there had been times that she had felt a little homesick, especially when she was ill after seeing her mother at the theater. Yet, as familiar as the estate was, she could not shake the foreboding, prison-like feel that her home now projected.

When they entered the house, her mother was standing beside the butler, waiting to greet them. After her father's anger, Charlotte braced herself for another tongue-lashing.

Her mother had encouraged her betrothal to the Comte as much as her father had, despite Charlotte's oft-expressed desire to marry for love. However, her mother's eyes now filled with tears, and she opened her arms to her daughter.

“Charlotte, darling,” she said, embracing her. “I am so glad that you are well.”

The earl cleared his throat.

“I had to retrieve our daughter from the constables, and you are welcoming her warmly, as though she has not disgraced us?” he asked.

Her mother glared at her father.

“She is still our daughter,” she said, giving the earl a defiant look. “There is no need to be so callous.”

The earl frowned.

“There will be plenty of time for reunions this evening at dinner,” he said. “For now, Charlotte will go to her room and stay there. I am too angry and disappointed to continue this conversation just now. Perhaps you should send Ruth back to her duties.”

Charlotte looked at her mother, her eyes pleading. Her mother looked from her to her father, clearly wanting to say more. At last, however, she nodded.

“Very well, darling,” she said. She looked

at Charlotte with a sad smile. “I will see you this evening.” She squeezed her daughter’s hand warmly, then gestured for Ruth to follow her.

When the women were out of earshot, the earl led Charlotte up the stairs and straight to her room.

“We will discuss this further, Charlotte,” the earl said, keeping his voice low. “I am very disappointed in you and will not overlook this little rebellion. For now, you will remain in

your quarters, and you will not upset your mother. She is devastated and embarrassed by all of this, just as much as I am.”

Charlotte’s face flushed with shame. She had seen the sadness in her mother’s eyes, and she felt even guiltier knowing that she had hurt her. With her head lowered, she entered her bedroom, flinching as her father closed the door firmly behind her.

Dinner that evening was even more tense than the carriage ride home had been.

However, it was also a silent meal. Charlotte managed to catch her mother's eye, which winked at her.

She realized that her mother had spoken to her father and convinced him not to bring up the subject, at least for the evening. She gave her mother a small, grateful smile, which her mother returned with another wink.

Charlotte had not realized how much she had missed her mother until that moment, and she resisted the urge to rise and hug her.

Instead, she pushed her food around her plate until, at last, the meal was concluded.

She excused herself quietly and went straight to her bedroom. As stressful as things had been since her father arrived to retrieve her, she did not expect to be able to sleep, but she drifted off as soon as she settled into her large, soft bed.

The following days passed almost exactly as the first had. Her father said very little, and she saw less of her mother than she had

hoped. Her mother was warm and loving when they met, but she also seemed distant and sad. Once more, Charlotte felt terrible guilt at having disappointed and distressed her so. She also felt an incredible sadness at not being able to tell her mother about Duncan. Despite how things had ended with them, she missed him dearly, and she wanted more than anything to seek her mother's advice. She also knew, however, that mentioning Duncan would only remind her mother of her transgression, and she did not want to hurt her further.

Charlotte rarely left her room, except for meals. She tried to spend some time reading in the library, but she could not focus on any of the books. She would have joined her mother for tea, but she noticed that her mother went to a tea- house in London almost every day instead of taking tea at home. Neither had she seen much of Ruth since they had returned.

Her father kept Ruth very busy, and it was beginning to feel as though her father was keeping her as isolated as he possibly could,

even from her maid. One afternoon, however, just after lunch, Ruth slipped into Charlotte's room. Charlotte was sitting by the window, staring out over the gardens, hardly noticing the beautiful flowers that were in full bloom.

“My lady,” Ruth said softly as Charlotte sat by her bedroom window. “Are you well?”

Charlotte sighed and smiled sadly.

“I suppose it could always be worse,” she said.

Ruth looked at her sympathetically.

“Is there something I can do for you?”

she asked.

Charlotte shook her head, then stopped.

“Have you spoken with Mother lately?”

she asked.

Ruth shook her head.

“She only speaks to me when it is necessary, or to assign me a task,” she said sadly.

It dawned on Charlotte then that her parents must be just as upset with Ruth as they were her. She hugged Ruth fiercely, biting her lip to fight tears.

“I am so sorry,” she whispered.

Ruth patted her shoulder.

“They will not stay angry forever,” she said, trying to reassure her. Charlotte, however, was not so sure.

She wanted to believe that her parents would eventually forgive her, but there had been little sign, except for her mother’s warmth during their infrequent interactions, that there would ever be an end to the tension.

Just then, the door to her bedroom flew open, and in the doorway stood her father. He had the stern look on his face that had marked

every encounter between them since she had returned home. He would not even speak to her at the rare meals she took in the dining room rather than in her bedroom.

Her stomach turned to ice. She knew that, if he were going out of his way to speak to her, whatever he had to say could not be good.

Ruth stepped toward Charlotte, but the earl waved her away.

“Leave us,” he said. “I would speak to my daughter alone.”

Ruth looked at Charlotte, her eyes wide. Charlotte avoided her gaze, too afraid even to nod in agreement. With hesitation, Ruth left the room.

Charlotte slowly lifted her head and was glad to see that Ruth had not closed the door, and that she was standing in the hallway out of her father’s view. She quickly turned her attention to her father, so that he would not

turn and spot the maid.

“Yes, Father?” Charlotte asked, trying to keep her voice level and smooth.

I wanted to give you the good news personally.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. Had Duncan come to say that he forgave her and still wished to court her? Hope swelled in Charlotte’s heart, and she stepped toward her father.

“What news, Father?” she asked, clasping her hands in front of her, her eyes bright and wide.

“It looks as though there will be a wedding for you, after all,” the earl continued.

Charlotte smiled brightly.

“Oh, Father,” she said. “Do you mean it?”

The earl nodded.

“Indeed, I do,” he said. “I have received word from Comte Francois, and he has graciously decided to overlook this little . . . mishap. I explained to him that it was merely an innocent, unintentional mix-up.”

Charlotte blinked, taking a moment to let her father’s words sink it.

“The Comte?” she echoed.

Her father nodded again.

“Yes, Charlotte,” he said, looking at her with a satisfied expression. “You are very fortunate. He could have pressed charges against you for sending an imposter in your place. Instead, he said that all will be forgiven if he can come and escort you back to France personally.”

Charlotte felt the room begin to spin. She had been sure that the Comte would already be married to Christine. She had begun to allow herself to hope that, even though she

had been forced to return to her father's home, she had managed to avoid marrying the loathsome Comte.

“Father,” Charlotte said, her voice shaking. “Please, you must not make me do this.”

The earl held up his hand, shaking his head.

“This is not a discussion, Charlotte,” he said. “This wedding was arranged years ago,

and I have no intention of breaking my word to Comte Francois. You are fortunate that you escaped spending time in prison, and you should be grateful to the Comte for being so forgiving.”

Charlotte began to panic. She had to find some way to convince her father not to marry her to the Comte. She might have ruined her chances with Duncan, but wedding Francois would ensure that all hope of ever seeing or speaking to Duncan again would be gone forever. She could not bear the thought of

never having Duncan in her life.

“But what about Lord Willetton?” she asked weakly.

The earl looked at her as though she were mad.

“What of him?” he asked. “What does he have to do with any of this?”

“He asked to court me, Father,” she said.

“And I said yes.”

Her father's eyes widened, and Charlotte instantly regretted mentioning Duncan's interest in her.

“You agreed to a courtship with another man, when you were already betrothed to the Comte?” he asked, his face reddening.

“Yes,” she said, holding her head high. Mentioning Duncan gave her the strength to speak more confidently to her father. “I love him, and, if I am to marry anyone, I wish it to

be him.”

Charlotte braced herself, prepared for her father to raise his voice. Instead, however, he just looked at her and shook his head.

“Well,” he said. “From what I understand of the statements provided to the constables by Lord Willeton and his mother, you are forbidden to ever set foot on that estate again. You cannot be courted by someone who does not wish to see you.”

Charlotte's cheeks grew warm. The memory of Duncan's last words as the constables escorted her from the house rang clearly in her mind, and she felt tears sting her eyes. She knew that she would find no solace from her father, but she could not refrain from continuing to plead for leniency.

“Perhaps if I write a letter to him, he will read it and agree to speak to me,” she said.

The earl shook his head, and, for a moment, Charlotte thought she saw pity in his

eyes. It was gone before she could be certain, however, and his stern expression returned.

“I will not allow it,” he said, his voice flat and even. “The Comte will arrive in a few weeks, and you will be going with him to France to be married.”

Charlotte took her father’s arm in her hands.

“Please,” she begged. “I must try to speak to Lord Willetton. You must let me try.”

The earl pulled away from his daughter's grasp, shaking his head firmly.

“I must do no such thing,” he said. “And I will not. To ensure that you do not go behind my back or attempt to flee again, you will not be permitted to leave the grounds until the Comte arrives to escort you to France.”

Charlotte gasped.

“You cannot keep me locked up in the

house, Father,” she said. “I am a grown woman, and you cannot prevent me from leaving.”

The earl snorted.

“A true grown lady would never have carried out such a deceptive trick,” he said, his voice rising once more. “And I most certainly can prevent you from leaving the grounds. You will remain on the estate at all times, and that is final.”

With this proclamation, the earl turned sharply and left the room. Charlotte stared after him, feeling as though the world was dissolving around her. She had found the man she wanted to marry, made him hate her, and, worst of all, she was still being forced to marry Comte Francois. Despite the gravity of the situation, Charlotte found that she was too numb and paralyzed to cry.

“I heard what he said to you,” Ruth said, rushing to Charlotte’s side. “Are you alright?”

Charlotte could not bring herself to speak. She shook her head, still staring at the empty doorway.

“Oh, Ruth,” she whispered at last. “What am I going to do?”

Chapter 24

Duncan entered the house and closed the door firmly behind him. Before the butler could say anything, he brushed past him and stormed into his bedroom.

He refused to deal with the paperwork on his desk. The unsuccessful meeting that he had had that afternoon was just the most recent of many since Christine, or Charlotte, was taken away.

He could not bring himself to concentrate

on business. He could not manage to care about it since she was gone. She occupied his every thought, and he felt as though he was going mad.

He poured himself a glass of brandy from the bottle that rested on his bookcase. Then he sat down on his bed, put the glass on his nightstand and ran his hands through his hair.

His mind was a tumultuous storm of anger and sadness. He knew that he must gather himself together and move past this,

but, at that moment, he did not care. He wanted to lock himself away from everyone and everything forever.

A loud knock proved to him that he would have no such luck. The relentlessness of the knock told him that only one person could be on the other side.

With a resigned sigh, Duncan rose from the bed. He took a long sip from his glass to prepare himself. Then, he dragged himself to the door to open it.

“Hello, Mother,” Duncan said, his voice sounding as heavy as he felt. Helena was the last person he wanted to see, but he was too defeated to resist her presence.

“Oh, my,” his mother breathed, seeming out of sorts.

Duncan looked at Helena, trying to figure out what had her so flustered.

“Mother,” he began, but the duchess held

up her hand.

“You do not presume to attend the ball dressed like that, do you?” she demanded.

Duncan stared at her, trying to understand what she meant. Then, it dawned on him. He was to attend the debutante ball that evening, the ball to which he had invited Christine. That moment felt a million years away, and he quickly began rehearsing remorseful rejections to give to his mother.

“You know well how difficult business has been lately,” he began, not feeling at all guilty about having no intention of attending the ball.

Helena waved her hand dismissively, as though she had all the answers.

“Of course, darling,” she said, “but every once in a while, every gentleman must take time away for himself.”

Duncan chuckled dryly.

“I believe that I have taken more than enough time for myself,” he said, thinking back to the meetings that had failed so miserably lately.

His mother huffed dismissively.

“Your partners understand your distress,” she said. Duncan raised his eyebrow, desperately wanting to ask what she meant. Unfortunately, he did not have to. “Besides, you promised your attendance at the ball this

evening.”

Duncan frowned, resisting the urge to cover his face with his palm. Of course, he remembered agreeing to attend the ball, but he had accepted the invitation when he still had hope that Christine would attend with him.

However, he knew that refusing the invitation now would not only reflect poorly on his reputation, but it would speak volumes about Christine’s deception. As much as he

wished that her lies were his only trouble, he knew that mentioning anything regarding them would be social suicide.

He was left with little choice but to attend, and to try to pretend that everything was fine. Besides, he knew that no matter how he was feeling, his mother would manage to make everything all about her, and that was something he was not in the mood to deal with tonight.

“I will prepare for the ball, Mother,” he

said, forcing a smile. “I was simply too preoccupied to dress earlier.”

Helena studied her son carefully. For a second, Duncan dared hope that his mother would see his distress and not demand his attendance at the ball. However, after a moment, she nodded curtly.

“See that you do,” she said simply. “You would not want to disappoint your peers.”

* * *

As soon as he arrived, Duncan wished desperately that he could turn around and leave. He also could not keep himself from hoping that he might see Christine. As he looked around for her, he bumped into a woman who had stepped in front of him. He looked down and gave her a small smile.

“Please, forgive me,” he said with a bow.

“That was terribly careless. Are you alright?”

The woman giggled and blushed.

“I am quite fine, my lord,” she said. “It is wonderful to see you.”

Duncan blinked, trying to recall her face, since she seemed to know him, but he did not think she looked familiar. Nevertheless, he smiled warmly, silently cursing himself for bumping into her. Now that he was speaking to her, she would expect him to ask her to dance, and he could hardly shirk from his duty.

“Would you care to dance?” he asked. He decided that if he were going to be obliged to dance with the strange woman, it would be best if he did so at once so that he could leave as soon as possible. With any luck, the woman’s dance card would be filled, and he would not have to partner with her. When she beamed at him, however, he knew that was not the case.

“I have the next two dances available,” she said.

Duncan's smile became forced as he offered her his arm.

“Well, then,” he said. “Shall we?”

As they began to dance, the woman reintroduced herself, but Duncan forgot her name as soon as it left her lips.

He vaguely heard her say that she had been formerly introduced to him at another ball some time back by her brother, or perhaps her cousin. He wasn't really listening to her.

Truthfully, she was talking too fast for him to follow what she was saying, and it was clear that she was not very intelligent. She seemed to be another typical woman of the ton, one who cared only for being beautiful in order to catch herself a husband. Duncan didn't even find her beautiful, but he could not deny the reason why he felt that way. She was not Christine.

Just then, he caught sight of a familiar hairstyle and blue dress. The gold ringlets

hanging from the back of the neatly arranged style made his heart stop. The voice of the woman still chattering in his ear faded away completely, and he stared at the thin visage across the ballroom.

He blinked, sure that his eyes were deceiving him, but when he looked again, he saw the same woman still standing there.

With little hesitation, he held up his hand and mumbled an apology to the woman standing next to him. He turned his back on

her before she had finished her curtsy, not caring about the wounded expression on her face.

He was losing more and more interest every minute she spoke anyway, and he had a more important mission on his mind. He quickly wove his way through the clusters of people standing between him and Christine. But when he reached her, he paused. *Should he speak to her? What would he say?*

Before he could touch her shoulder, the

women ceased talking, looked up at him, and blushed. This alerted Christine to his presence, and she turned around.

Duncan opened his mouth, startled and clueless as to what to say. However, just as he grasped the words, he looked into the woman's eyes. Her deep, brown eyes.

“Yes?” she asked, seeming pleased to see him, but with no clear knowledge of his identity.

Duncan stared, feeling embarrassed. It was not Christine. His heart plummeted with disappointment. He had not realized how much he wanted this woman to be Christine, until he saw that it was not.

Relying on all the charm he could muster, he smiled brilliantly at the woman. He bowed deeply, and for a moment too long, to collect his thoughts. He fell back on the social training befitting his status.

“I beg your pardon, my lady,” he said, his

tone gracious and warm. “I thought that you were someone else. I was expecting to meet someone here, and it would seem that I have made a mistake.”

The woman returned his dazzling smile. He saw that she was pretty, but her eyes were just as vacant as the woman with whom he had been speaking previously, and he knew that he would have no real interest in her.

“Not at all, my lord,” she said, giving him a deep curtsy in return. “Whomever you are

looking for is a fortunate woman indeed.”

Duncan winced inwardly. He maintained his smile, determined to pretend he did not notice the woman’s flirtatious behavior.

“Well, I will not keep you from your company any longer,” he said, dipping his head. “I must find the lady whom I agreed to meet before she thinks that I am ignoring her.”

With a small wave, he walked away, heading for the balcony. Before he stepped

outside, he glanced behind him.

He could see the blond woman whispering excitedly to her friends, and behind them he could see the dark-haired woman glaring at him. He lowered his gaze, doing his best to avoid eye contact with anyone, and continued out to the balcony.

As he stepped outside, he saw two women huddled together on the far side. He kept his distance, even though they were apparently engrossed in conversation and had

not noticed his presence.

He breathed a small sigh of relief and took up a spot in the shadows at the other end of the balcony. He stared out at the gardens, admiring the variety of flowers and plants that spanned nearly the entirety of the back part of the estate.

He bit his lip, fighting back tears. He understood that Christine, or whatever her name was, had lied to him, but, no matter what he did and no matter what he told

himself, he could not help but miss her.

Not for the first time, he found himself wondering if he had made a terrible mistake by not allowing her to explain herself. She might have been deceitful, but he was almost certain that she had been sincere about wanting to tell him the truth the night she was arrested.

He wondered if he had not let his hurt feelings make him blind to the fact that she was hurting, too, and that she could have

hidden her true identity for a perfectly valid reason.

In the midst of his brooding thoughts, Duncan heard something that caught his attention. The two women on the balcony were speaking more loudly now. They seemed utterly oblivious of his presence, and he took advantage of their oversight.

“I know, can you believe it?” one of the women was saying. “Why in the world would Lady Charlotte want to do such a thing?”

“I cannot imagine,” the other woman said. “I could never pretend to be poor. It is truly baffling.”

Duncan felt his blood start to heat, and he had to resist the urge to defend Charlotte. However, his mother’s words filled his head, and he knew that he could not speak to these women, lest he draw further attention to himself and Christine.

Despite the risk, however, he wanted

desperately to defend Christine, or Charlotte.

Deep down, he knew that even if he had never known her true name, he had gotten to know, and had come to love, the true woman behind the deceitful façade.

Before he could say something that both he and his mother might regret, he hurried from the balcony. Rather than dance with any of the other women who were desperate to catch his attention, he made his apologies to his hosts and ran for his coach.

After such a night, he could not leave quickly enough. He would figure out an excuse for his mother, and, anyway, he had not caused enough of a scene to shame her. Anything beyond that would be her problem, and he frankly did not care. He had done what she asked by attending the ball, and he had even danced with a couple of the women, so he did not see why she would have any legitimate reason to complain.

He missed Christine, or whatever her name really was, and he was not going to lie

to himself about that any longer.

Chapter 25

Three days before the Comte was due to arrive, Charlotte's parents began at last to warm up a little.

Her mother started coming into her chambers at night and sitting with her for an hour or so, before they both retired for the evening. They even laughed and reminisced about Charlotte's childhood, just as they had before Charlotte had left. Her father even began speaking to her during meals again.

It would have been a joyous turn of events, had it not been overshadowed by the knowledge that her parents were only warming up because the Comte would arrive soon, and they would finally have their way.

Taking what Charlotte knew would likely be her last opportunity, she stopped her mother the night before Francois was to arrive.

“Can I talk to you about something, Mother?” she asked.

Her mother patted her hand, reclaiming her seat.

“Of course, darling,” she said.

Charlotte took a deep breath. She knew she was risking a great deal, but it was eating away at her. If anyone would understand her feelings, it would surely be her mother.

“I know that what I did was wrong,” she began, gauging her mother’s reaction.

Her mother's eyes clouded instantly, and she gave Charlotte a sad smile.

“Let us speak no more of it, darling,” she said, beginning to rise once more.

“I am very sorry for bringing it up again,” she said quickly, “and I do not wish to hurt you further. But I have been unable to stop thinking about Lord Willetton. I believe that I am in love with him, and I cannot wed the Comte and simply bury these feelings.”

Her mother's face fell, as did Charlotte's heart. She wished she could take back her words, because they clearly did not make her mother sympathize with her.

“Charlotte,” her mother said. “I know that you had a vision of the way you wanted your life to be, but you cannot break your promise to the Comte.”

Charlotte felt a lump form in her throat.

“But Mother, I did not make that promise,” she said.

Her mother nodded sadly.

“I understand that,” she said. “However, a woman of your status has certain obligations, both to your station and your family, and you must fulfill both. Even when it is not what you want.”

Charlotte stared at her mother in disbelief.

“So, you would see me unhappily married to an uncouth, disreputable man, for the sake of preserving my station?” she asked.

Her mother stood, and Charlotte could see the tears in her eyes.

“It is your duty,” she said softly, turning away from her daughter. “You would do well to accept it and make the best of it.”

With that, her mother quickly left the

room. Charlotte stared at her hands, her last shreds of hope fading with her mother's footsteps. Charlotte collapsed onto the bed and cried herself to sleep.

* * *

Charlotte stood with her parents the next afternoon as the Comte's carriage pulled up in front of the door.

She felt her stomach flipping, and she prayed that she could at least get through the

introductions and tea without vomiting on Comte Francois.

She stood with her head high and her manner determined, but she could not bring herself to force a smile. Her mother would not meet her gaze, and her father was too focused on Francois to notice. She could not help but feel resentment bubble inside of her, as her father greeted the Comte with a smile bigger than any she had seen on his face in years.

“Welcome,” the earl said, beckoning

Francois into the entryway and over to his wife and daughter. “I believe you remember my wife.”

Francois gave a bow, making the slight hunch in his back temporarily less visible. His beady eyes stayed on Charlotte as he bowed, and his stringy brown hair fell into his eyes. Charlotte thought she saw his lanky frame wobble a little as he bent, and she wondered if he had imbibed before he arrived.

“A pleasure, Lady Devon,” he said. His

muddled words confirmed Charlotte's theory, and she turned her head away, so that no one would see her bitter face.

“And this,” her father said, grasping her elbow firmly and guiding her toward Francois, “is our daughter Charlotte.”

Francois studied her for a moment with eyes that Charlotte could only describe as hungry. She felt as though she were being inspected like a slab of meat at a butcher's shop, and her blood boiled. She curtsied,

trying to mask as much of her displeasure as she could.

“Indeed,” Francois said, taking her hand and kissing it with abnormally damp, cold lips. “She is far lovelier than the young woman I met, to be sure.”

“You are too kind,” she said, not bothering to feign any sincerity.

“Come,” the earl said, ignoring Charlotte’s behavior. “We will take tea in the

drawing room.

Charlotte said little during tea, but Francois spoke enough for everyone. Even her mother seemed disillusioned, as the Comte continued to drink and loudly recount tales of both his business and personal life.

Of course, he never outright addressed any of the most damning claims, but a couple of his stories alluded to the fact that he had bedded women before her. Her father laughed along with the man, either ignoring or

completely ignorant of the implications of the man's words. Charlotte stared into her teacup, feeling more hopeless and disgusted with the Comte's every word.

Two hours and four snifters of brandy for the Comte later, she was at last able to return to her quarters.

The Comte was getting settled into the guest room, where he would be sleeping, and her mother was planning the dinner parties that were to happen over the following days.

Charlotte still showed no emotion, but she had to stifle her displeasure at how anxious her parents seemed to celebrate marrying their daughter to such a vulgar man. Some part of her felt that she would rather leave for France the following day than have people see her with the Comte. Perhaps, however, he would continue behaving in this fashion, and her father would see him for who he really was.

Sure enough, at the dinner party the

following evening, the Comte drank excessively and told even more distasteful tales than he had the previous day. Charlotte even noticed that he had changed some of the details from the stories he had told them during tea.

She also overheard a handful of people remarking on the Comte's crude behavior, but her father took no notice. Charlotte did her best to ignore the Comte, and it worked. At one point later in the evening, as everyone mingled in the drawing room after dinner, she

realized that the Comte was nowhere in sight. She looked around, curious rather than concerned.

She made her way to the door and heard a commotion just down the hallway. She peeked around the corner and saw Francois standing close to one of their servants, his hand drawn back. His face was contorted into a snarl, and the woman looked terrified. Charlotte could hardly believe her eyes, and she was rushing toward the pair before she could think.

“Excuse me,” she said. “What is happening here?”

Francois jumped back, nearly falling on his behind as he did so.

“This young lady was rude and insubordinate,” he said.

“Indeed,” Charlotte said, looking at the woman’s tear-streaked face. She smiled warmly at her and nodded, gesturing for the

woman to leave, which she did with alacrity.

“And so, you thought that you would
implement corporal punishment, rather than
report her to my parents?”

Francois smirked.

“Is that what you saw?” he asked.

“Because what everyone else will believe is
that I corrected a servant for forgetting her
place.”

Charlotte glared at Francois.

“We shall see about that,” she said,
storming off in search of her father.

When she found the earl, she led him
back into the hallway, where she had left
Francois. Unsurprisingly, the Comte was no
longer there, and the poor servant was long
gone.

“Father,” Charlotte said, looking around
for any sign of the Comte. “I just witnessed the
Comte preparing to strike one of the servants.”

The earl laughed.

“Charlotte,” he said. “Could you really think of no better lie than that?”

Charlotte stared blankly at her father.

“It is the truth,” she said. “I saw him myself.”

The earl’s face darkened.

“I will hear no more of this nonsense, Charlotte,” he said. “You very nearly ruined your chance to marry him. I will not allow you to sabotage this wedding again.”

With that, he turned on his heel and stormed away from his daughter. It wounded Charlotte that her father did not believe her. She could not bring herself to return to the party.

Instead, she ran outside and hid in the gardens until she heard the guests begin to

leave. Then she slipped into her bedroom and locked herself inside.

* * *

In the following days, Charlotte did everything she could to avoid the Comte. She could not stomach the sight of his face, nor could she tolerate the way her father seemed completely oblivious to the man's disgusting nature.

Two nights before they were to depart for

France, Charlotte's parents arranged for a special dinner to celebrate the end of the Comte's visit and their impending departure.

Charlotte successfully avoided dinner that evening by claiming to be finishing packing her things. She put on her most charming smile, swallowing the bile that rose in her throat. Fortunately, her father seemed pleased and gladly excused her from dining with them.

She curtsied formally to the Comte as

she left the room, taking a few deep breaths to combat the nausea that lingered, until she was safely out of sight. Instead of going to her quarters, however, she hurried to the library and closed the door quietly.

She walked over to one of the bookcases that flanked the large, floor to ceiling window, and idly chose a book.

She wanted to escape from the nightmare that was rapidly becoming her reality, but she knew that an attempt would be an exercise in

futility.

Instead, she sat with the book closed in her lap, and looked over the landscape illuminated by the setting sun.

She thought of Duncan once again, and how much she missed him, and how desperately she wished she could see him. Even though it was almost time for her to depart with the Comte, she continued to hope for an opportunity to explain everything to Duncan.

She dozed off, and, when she awoke, it was full dark outside. She walked slowly to the door of the library, hoping that her father and the Comte had already retired for the evening. She pressed her ear to the door and heard nothing but silence on the other side.

She opened the door slowly and slipped out quickly, tiptoeing up the stairs and toward her quarters. She was almost to the door when a figure brushed against her. The smell of liquor and sweat and leather told her at once

who it was.

“Excuse me, Comte,” she said, cursing herself for sleeping so long in the library.

“Charlotte, *ma cherie*,” Francois slurred. Charlotte’s stomach flipped as the smell of alcohol hit her in the face. Instead of stepping aside so that she could enter her room, he moved closer to her, trapping her between him and the wall. He reached up and touched her cheek, sending a chill down her spine. “Look at how beautiful you are.”

Charlotte turned her face away, trying to escape the reek of his breath. To her horror, however, he firmly grabbed her chin and turned her face up to his. Even in the dim hallway lighting, she could see how red and glassy his eyes were. He was clearly, and unsurprisingly, intoxicated.

There had not been a single night since his arrival that Francois had not imbibed to excess. She could not understand how her father did not see it, but she wished fervently,

if vainly, that he would.

“Forgive me, my lord,” she said, struggling to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. “This is highly unorthodox and inappropriate. Everyone else has gone to bed, and we should not be alone together.”

The Comte chuckled and released his grip on her, widening the gap between them marginally as he teetered drunkenly. Charlotte glanced to her right, contemplating rushing through the narrow space between herself and

Francois and locking herself into her room.

She was not fast enough, however.

Francois recovered quickly and put his left hand on the wall, just beside Charlotte's head, again pinning her in place. He leaned in closer, and Charlotte thought she might be sick, as the strong smell of the liquor burned her nostrils once more.

“As I recall, you are quite the unorthodox young woman, my dear,” he said. “I do wonder just how much young Lord Willetton

might have compromised your reputation while you were in his, er, employ.”

Charlotte felt her cheeks grow hot, and she was suddenly glad for the dim light and the Comte's intoxicated state. For him, of all people, to imply that Duncan had been anything but decent and proper with her was infuriating.

“This is highly inappropriate, my lord,” Charlotte said, this time letting her disdain make itself apparent.

Again, Francois laughed, which only angered Charlotte further. She tried to push him away from her, but he caught her hands.

“We will be wed in less than a month,” Francois said. Charlotte noted how smug he sounded, and she shuddered. “It is hardly inappropriate for me to show affection to my betrothed.”

Charlotte’s heart was racing. He had her well and truly trapped, and his hands should

not have been on her as they were. For the first time, she wondered whether he might try to treat her as he had the other women from his past.

Just then, a door closed firmly, and light, rapid footsteps approached the pair.

“Forgive me, my lady,” Ruth’s voice said firmly. Charlotte looked at her maid’s face, which was flushed with anger and determination. She addressed Charlotte, but she narrowed her gaze directly at Francois. “Is

there any way I can be of service?”

Francois looked away from Charlotte, temporarily distracted by Ruth's presence. Charlotte used the opportunity to push him as far away from her as she could.

This time she was successful, and she darted past him before he could find another opportunity to grasp her again.

“Thank you, Ruth,” she said. “I was just retiring for the evening. The Comte here was

just bidding me goodnight. Isn't that right?"

The Comte glared at Charlotte, knowing full well what she was doing. However, she knew that he would not continue pressing her now that there was a witness.

"Yes," he mumbled, turning away. "Good night, Lady Charlotte."

"Good night, my lord," she said.

Once the Comte had stumbled away,

Charlotte beckoned silently for Ruth to follow her. The two women entered Charlotte's quarters, and she locked the door behind them. Ruth reached for her hands, but she threw her arms around her friend, choking back sobs.

“Are you alright?” Ruth asked.

Charlotte nodded, unable to speak.

“Did he hurt you?” Ruth asked, growing alarmed.

Charlotte shook her head, but she began trembling. She released Ruth and took her hands, trying to compose herself.

“No,” she said, her voice trembling. “But I believe he had every intention of trying to claim what he believes is his, tonight.”

Ruth’s eyes grew wide with rage.

“We must tell your father at once,” Ruth said, tugging at Charlotte’s hand.

Charlotte shook her head sadly.

“It is my word against his,” she said, letting her tears flow freely. “The Comte would convince my father that this was merely another ploy to avoid marrying him.”

Ruth looked at Charlotte, her face falling. Charlotte could see that Ruth knew she was right, and it upset her a great deal.

She wanted the Comte’s actions to be

discovered, too, but, even if they were, such a revelation would only result in upsetting her father and angering the Comte.

The idea of marrying a man who could treat her in such a fashion made Charlotte feel faint. She collapsed, covering her face with her hands, and releasing the sobs she had suppressed in front of Francois.

Chapter 26

Duncan sat at his desk, which was cluttered with disorganized work documents and letters, swirling a glass of brandy in his hand. He had sat down with the intention of addressing some pressing correspondence and rescheduling some meetings, but instead he brooded. He knew that if he did not pull himself together soon and get back to his regular routine, his business reputation would be ruined.

He still could not force himself to bring order to the chaotic mess of randomly tossed paperwork. Each page was a constant reminder of Christine, of how immaculate she had always kept his office, and he could not bear to take up the task. He also could not even consider hiring another assistant.

Christine had been unique, and he knew that he could never replace her.

Knowing full well that he could not get himself back on track on his own, he

begrudgingly sent for his mother. He felt sure that she would be too self-absorbed and arrogant to question why he was asking for her assistance. Truthfully, he would rather tell her that he had ruined a few meetings by mere happenstance, rather than explain what had truly distracted him. *As though she does not already know*, he thought bitterly.

While he waited for her arrival, Duncan took another look around his desk. He supposed that his mother would have something to say about the mess, but he still

could not manage anything that resembled organization. Instead he finished his latest drink and made himself look busy by shuffling pages around, as though he were actually getting something done.

He tried to immerse himself in some of the documents as he sifted through them, but none of the words on the pages made any sense to him. The only words he could comprehend in that moment had to do with Christine, and they just made him feel even more depressed.

About an hour later, his mother breezed into the study. He forced himself to look casual and nonplussed as he gazed up at her.

“Thank you for coming, Mother,” he said.

Helena beamed, and Duncan winced. He wished again that he could have called on anyone but her.

“Of course, darling,” she said. Then, her brow furrowed. “How are you?”

Duncan pasted on a grin of his own, hoping it looked like less of a grimace than it felt to him.

“I am well,” he said. “I just need some advice on a couple of business deals that did not go as I had envisioned.”

Helena clasped her hands together with glee. Duncan suppressed a groan. This would certainly reinforce Helena’s belief that he could not get by in his business without her,

but he was left with little choice.

“I am thrilled to help, darling,” she said, overjoyed. “Do you have any documents for me to review?”

Duncan kept pretending to sift through the papers, hoping that she would not catch him floundering. Fortunately, a moment later, he found a document related to his most recently ruined business deal. He handed it to her, avoiding her gaze and pretending to continue looking for other documents.

Helena stared at the page he handed her for a moment. When he dared glance at her from the corner of his eye, he could see that she was not even reading it. He lifted his head, studying her carefully.

After another moment of staring at the page, she looked up at him, beaming more widely than before.

“You know,” she said, her voice ominously casual and smooth. “I met the most

interesting young lady at tea the other day.”

Duncan reflexively put his hand up to his temple. He should have known that his mother would not have come into his office in such a good mood unless she was up to some sort of scheme. Once again, he cursed himself for calling for her, and wished more than anything that he could just send her, and whatever plan she had concocted, away. But he knew that if he were to have any hope of her help, he would have to hear her out.

“Oh?” he asked, feigning interest.

Helena was so absorbed in her scheme that she did not notice Duncan’s strained attempt at caring.

“Oh, yes, darling,” she said. “Her name is Suzanne Bradshaw. She is the daughter of the Earl of Rickton. She recently made her debut, and she is such a lovely young lady. She plays piano exquisitely, and she has a voice that rivals the angels. And she is involved in charity work. I think that the two of you

would get on famously.”

Duncan struggled with all his remaining strength to keep from putting his face in his hands. The woman his mother was describing was the type in which he could not have had less interest. He knew, however, trying to argue with her would only result in him becoming more upset and exhausted.

Rather than changing the subject, he pretended to sit thoughtfully for a moment, so that he could collect his thoughts and respond

in a way that would appease his mother,
without committing to something that he
might regret.

“She sounds lovely indeed,” he said,
turning his attention back to his desk. Even
with his mother talking to him, he still could
not get his mind off Christine.

His mother continued, oblivious to her
son’s reactions.

“Oh, I knew that you would think so,”

she said, delighted. “I have invited her for dinner this Friday, and I was hoping that you would agree to attend as well.”

There it is, Duncan thought, the real reason she rushed over here.

“Believe me, darling, the two of you would make the perfect pair,” Helena continued. “She is thrilled at the prospect of meeting you.”

He looked at his mother, weighing his

options. The last thing he wanted to do was attend a dinner party, especially one hosted by his mother with the purpose of finding him a bride. However, it was clear that Helena had her mind set on the idea, and he did not have the energy or the willpower to argue with her. Helena Lancaster was as persistent as she was brusque, and she would not take no for an answer, even if she had to bring the dinner to Duncan's home.

With a heavy sigh, Duncan nodded.

“Of course, Mother,” he said, his voice flat and emotionless.

Helena pressed her hands to her chest, either ignoring or oblivious to her son’s lack of enthusiasm.

“Splendid, darling,” she said. “I am sure you will have a wonderful time.”

As Duncan had hoped, giving in to Helena’s wishes served as an effective method of getting rid of her. She rushed from the

room, clearly pleased with herself for having gotten her way. Duncan watched her leave with another sigh.

With his mother gone, he no longer needed to pretend to work. He shoved the papers in front of him aside, propped his elbows on his desk, and put his head in his hands. He hardly cared that she had not stayed to help. In fact, he was glad. If she had stayed, she would just have continued gushing about the young woman, and he could not stomach such conversation. All he cared about

was Christine.

He cancelled all his meetings for the rest of the week and stayed in his quarters, passing the time alone until Friday arrived.

Fortunately, his mother did not return, and so he was left to his solitude. He hardly ate, and his sleep was fitful. By the time Friday afternoon arrived, he felt like a hollow shell of a man.

Nonetheless, he cleaned himself up and dressed in a crisp new coat, so that his

disheveled appearance would not earn him a lecture from his mother. He begrudgingly made the trip to his mother's home, trying to shake off some of the darkness that had enveloped him since Christine's arrest. Instead, he put on an air of politeness and charm.

The butler ushered Duncan into the dining room, where his mother and Suzanne Bradshaw were awaiting his arrival. The first thing Duncan noticed was the young woman's stark contrast to Christine in appearance. She appeared a bit shorter and plumper. Her hair

was dark, almost raven, and her eyes were a dark green. Her cheeks seemed to be permanently flushed, and her skin was a few shades darker than Christine's.

As he looked at her, Duncan noticed something else. The blue dress she wore strongly resembled one of the dresses that he had bought for Christine. Duncan smiled, trying to hide the renewed pain that the thought brought him.

Helena rose and moved to greet her son.

She kissed him on the cheek with cool, dry lips.

“Good evening, Duncan,” she said.

“Please, join us.” She smiled again, then gestured for him to take a seat. She pointed to the seat beside Suzanne, but Duncan moved to the one across from her, pretending not to notice. Helena barely seemed affected, pleased enough to have gotten Duncan to attend.

“Duncan, darling,” Helena said as they sat down, and she gestured for the staff to

begin serving the meal. “I would like you to meet Lady Suzanne Bradshaw.”

Duncan nodded to her, glad to already be seated at the table and avoid the typical greeting customs.

Lady Suzanne gave Duncan a wide smile, blinking flirtatiously at him.

“It is a pleasure, Lord Willetton,” she said, her gaze locked on his.

“The pleasure is mine, my lady,” he said,
his *faux* charming smile firmly in place.

Suzanne’s grin widened, and she tilted up
her chin. It was clear that the young woman
thought very highly of herself, and Duncan
saw instantly why Helena liked her so much.
He broke the woman’s gaze and looked at his
mother, keeping his fake smile, but his eyes
filling with annoyance.

“Thank you for the invitation, Mother,”
he said.

Once more, Helena ignored Duncan's displeasure. She began instead engaging Suzanne in conversation.

“Lady Suzanne,” Helena said, her voice full of sweetness. “You were telling me about some of the charity work you do. Why don’t you tell Duncan about it? I am sure he would love to hear of it.”

Duncan nodded mechanically as the kitchen staff brought in the meal. He was far

from hungry, but he forced himself to eat as Suzanne talked, proudly boasting about her contributions to various charities. He forced himself to eat, so that he could focus on his plate rather than what she was saying.

The more she spoke, the clearer it became that she was not only over- confident, she was also snide and pretentious. She also talked too much. Even if he had wished to join in, he would not have been able to between her bragging and the constant flaunting of her status and wealth.

After what felt like hours, the meal was over, and Lady Suzanne had at last stopped talking. Duncan looked up in the silence and saw both Lady Suzanne and his mother looking at him expectantly. He donned his dazzling smile once again and nodded.

“That sounds very rewarding,” he said. He could not recall a single charity Suzanne had mentioned, but his response seemed to please both women a great deal.

“I knew you would think so,” Helena said, practically gloating. “Suzanne, perhaps you would like to join us in the drawing room for tea, and even be kind enough to play a song or two for us?”

Duncan stifled a groan, struggling to keep his smile intact. He said nothing, not wishing to encourage the woman. He wanted to say his goodbyes and leave. Helena, of course, had other ideas.

“Wouldn’t you like to hear Lady Suzanne

play and sing for us?” she asked.

Duncan glared at his mother through his smile. Though he was not interested in the woman, he could not bear to be rude, and his mother had effectively put him on the spot.

“That would be lovely,” he said.

Suzanne grinned widely at him again, and Duncan felt his stomach tighten. Despite his silence throughout the meal, she seemed convinced that he was interested in her.

“Well, if you insist, Lord Willetton,” she said, with a coquettish giggle.

Dutifully, Duncan followed his mother and Suzanne into the drawing room. Suzanne went straight toward the pianoforte and seated herself as though in her own home. She took a moment to touch her hair and smooth her dress, then she put her fingers up to the keys. Without hesitation, she began playing a lively piece, apparently from memory. After a moment of playing, she began to sing.

Duncan tried to listen, if only to be polite. She played precisely, clearly a product of years of training. Her voice was clear, but it was nothing spectacular. A glance at his mother told him that she thought the contrary. Duncan let his mind wander back to Christine. He had only heard her humming to herself on a couple of occasions, but her voice had been pure and airy, and full of the simple joy of the music. As with everything about Christine, it had been sincere and genuine, and that was what he loved most.

When the song finally ended long minutes later, Duncan applauded gently and bowed as she rose.

“That was wonderful, Lady Suzanne,” he said, giving her his best apologetic smile. “I do hate to leave in such a hurry, but I have a pressing matter to attend to.”

Helena’s face fell instantly into a suspicious sneer.

“Oh, but darling,” she said. “The tea has only just arrived, and I am sure that the two of you have much more to discuss.”

Duncan choked back a laugh. He knew his mother well enough to assume that she had expected him to propose to Suzanne that very evening. He had no intention of ever doing any such thing, but especially not that night. Nevertheless, to pacify his mother and Lady Suzanne, whose face was also slowly falling, he walked over to Suzanne and took her hand, kissing it gently.

“It was an absolute pleasure meeting you, Lady Suzanne,” he said, injecting as much honied sweetness into his voice as he could.

“You play and sing magnificently. I do regret rushing off, but I have some paperwork that I must finish before one of my cargo ships arrives early tomorrow morning.” It was mostly a true statement. He was expecting a shipment the following day, and he did need to check the invoice before it arrived.

However, he had already found it that afternoon, and all it needed was his signature.

This satisfied Lady Suzanne at once. The compliment seemed to boost her already swollen ego, and she smiled brightly once more.

“You are too kind, my lord,” she said, curtsying deeply. “I had a wonderful time this evening.”

“As did I,” he said, bowing. He turned to his mother, who also seemed at least temporarily appeased by his explanation.

“Well, we certainly mustn’t keep you from your work,” she said. “Thank you so much for coming, darling. Would you like me to call the butler to show you out?”

Duncan walked over to his mother and gave her a quick kiss on her cheek.

“No, thank you, Mother,” he said. “I will show myself out.”

Chapter 27

As the day of Charlotte's departure for France drew nearer, life returned to normal. Normal for everyone, that was, except for herself. Her initial panic gave way to defeat, and defeat begat resignation. She had hoped that she would find a permanent way out of her marriage to the Comte, especially once it became clear that he was even more vile than the rumors had told.

However, despite all the terrible things he had done since his arrival, her parents

seemed utterly oblivious. She was unsure whether it was because they simply did not see it, or if they were turning a blind eye to his behavior, but she was certain that if she went to France with him, her life would be even worse than she had ever imagined.

In a final, desperate attempt to avoid going with the Comte, Charlotte locked herself in her room. She pulled out a piece of stationary and an inkwell she had hidden in her bedside table and sat at her desk. Her mother had gone out for tea, and her father

was in town at a gentlemen's club with Francois, so she felt certain she would not be disturbed.

Before she could give herself a chance to change her mind or overthink her words, she began to write:

Dear Duncan,

I do not know if you wish to hear from me. I do not even know if this letter will reach you. But I cannot leave England without at least trying to

Speak to you one last time.

I do not have the words to express how sorry I am for deceiving you. I did not do so out of any desire to hurt you, although I do not know if that offers any consolation. It was born from the need to keep the world from knowing who I am, so that I could avoid a fate that, in my mind, is comparable to death. I was trying to escape an arranged marriage to a repulsive man whom I do not love, and find a life that I chose for myself. As soon as I realized that I was falling in love with you, I knew that I must tell you who I really

am and everything about me. Had I acted sooner, I would have told you and you would not have heard it from your mother and the constables. Please, know that I truly did intend to tell you the truth. That is why I agreed to dinner that night. I am sorry that I waited so long, and that things happened as they did.

I do not know if my words bring any consolation, or if they change anything. I certainly do not know if I deserve your forgiveness, but I felt that you at least deserve an explanation and my sincerest apology. I really do

*love you, Duncan, though I do not blame you if
you have trouble believing me. But, as I said, I
could not depart for France without telling you
everything.*

*I hope this letter reaches you, even if I do
not get the chance to see you before our ship sails.
I love you, Duncan, and I am certain that I
always will.*

All my love,

Charlotte Hackney

Charlotte pulled out an envelope from her desk and quickly sealed the letter inside. She hastily scribbled Duncan's address on the envelope, then slipped out of her bedroom door. She hesitated, listening for any sign that her parents or the Comte had returned home, but she was greeted by total silence. She tiptoed down the stairs, looking for the butler. He had worked with their family since she was a child, and she had always liked him. If anyone would help get her letter to Duncan, it would be him.

She turned the corner at the bottom of the stairs, preparing to head down the hallway to see if the butler was tending to other duties elsewhere in the house. As she stepped into the hallway, she nearly ran straight into her father. She gasped, quickly putting her hands behind her back.

The earl looked Charlotte over, his face a stern scowl.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Charlotte smiled nervously.

“I was just going to go out into the gardens,” she said quickly.

Her father peeked over her shoulder to her clasped hands, which were trying desperately to hide the letter.

“What is it you have there?” he asked.

Charlotte shook her head, her heart

sinking.

“Nothing of importance,” she said, trying to hold her father’s gaze.

The earl smirked.

“Then surely you will not mind if I take a look,” he said.

He reached behind her and snatched the letter from her trembling hands before she could protest. He tore it open and read it, his

face reddening as he did so.

When he was finished, he held the letter up to Charlotte's face.

"What did I tell you?" he asked, his voice hard and cold.

"Father, please," she began, but the earl held up his other hand.

"You will return to your room this instant," he said. "I will ensure that you do not

leave it. As for this,” he held up the letter and began shredding it to pieces in front of her. “It will never be seen or spoken of again.”

He finished tearing up the letter, then turned away from her and headed to the library, where a fire was burning. Charlotte did not need to watch him to know that he tossed the letter into the flames. With a sob, she ran up the stairs and into her room once more. A moment later, Charlotte heard the faint click of the lock. As promised, her father had locked her in. She buried her face in her

hands and cried.

* * *

The morning before she was to leave for France, Ruth entered Charlotte's room just as she was waking. She practically leapt from her bed and threw her arms around her maid.

“Oh, Ruth,” she said, her voice thick with emotion. “I have missed you.”

Her maid hugged her tightly for a

moment, then released her.

“Have you tried speaking with your parents again about the Comte?” she asked.

Charlotte shook her head sadly.

“It is no use,” she said. “They are convinced that I am simply telling lies to get out of this marriage.”

Ruth nodded slowly and sat in the chair by the window.

“So, it is off with the Comte for us tomorrow, then,” she said.

Charlotte winced at the statement. Ruth sounded even more dejected than she felt, and she recalled how excited her maid had once been about traveling to France, and guilt flooded her once more.

“Perhaps it will not be all bad,” Charlotte said. “We will still be able to visit all kinds of wonderful places in Paris, and I am sure that

there are beautiful parks, just as you were hoping.”

Ruth nodded again but said nothing.

Charlotte’s heart broke. It was bad enough when it was she alone that was hurting. Now her dearest friend had lost all her previous optimism, and she could offer no words of comfort. More than ever, she wished that she had Duncan to turn to. The very thought made her burst into tears, and she covered her face with her hands.

“I wish that we could have stayed in London with Duncan,” she said, sobbing quietly. “I miss him so much. I cannot believe all this has happened.”

A firm grip on her arms made her look up. Through her tear-blurred vision, she saw Ruth frowning at her. She blinked, trying to focus on her friend’s face.

“You should have been the one to tell him what happened,” Ruth said, her voice cracking with tears of her own. “Things should

not have happened the way they did. It should have been you who told him.”

Her friend’s words, though raw and rough, were true. Charlotte’s inability to right her wrongs before the authorities became involved was the reason everything had ended so badly.

“I know,” Charlotte whispered. “I should have said something after the first time Lady Helena confronted me.”

Ruth nodded firmly.

“Yes, you should have,” she said.

Charlotte’s sobs grew louder.

“I am so sorry, Ruth,” she said. “I never wanted to hurt you too.”

Ruth stood back, looking at Charlotte with bewilderment.

“Hurt me?” she asked. “My lady, I am

upset for you. Because the duchess brought the authorities to Lord Willetton's home, you are now forced to wed what is certainly one of the worst men in the world. Had you spoken with Lord Willetton first, all of this might have been avoided."

Charlotte nodded, tears streaming freely down her face.

"And because of my cowardice, you will be dragged into all of it with me," she said.

Ruth shook her head.

“I go with you willingly my lady,” she said. “I could just as easily choose to remain here, or even quit my position with your family. I will not, because I will not allow you to suffer that terrible man alone.”

Charlotte looked at her maid in wonder.

“Why are you so good to me?” she asked.

Ruth smiled at her sadly.

“Why do you feel that you do not deserve goodness or happiness?” she countered.

Charlotte stared at her dumbly. It was true. If she had thought more of herself, even after the lies she had told Duncan, she would have told him everything. Then she would be with Duncan and avoided having to marry the Comte.

Instead, she had somehow convinced herself that she and Duncan could never be

together because she had lied to him, and she had brought everything that had happened on herself. She could not even place all the blame on Helena. If she had just admitted her wrongs and tried to correct them at once, she would have stood a chance of being with Duncan. At least, she likely would not be forced into a life she dreaded.

“You are too good to me,” she said, hugging Ruth again.

“And you are not good enough to

yourself,” Ruth said, gently patting Charlotte’s back.

Charlotte took a deep breath before releasing her maid. She put on her bravest face and looked at Ruth.

“Well,” she said. “There is nothing to be done about it now. I must learn to accept my fate and make the best of what’s to come, whatever that may be.”

Ruth looked at her, her face still sad, but

also determined.

“I will be with you every step of the way,” she said.

Charlotte blinked away fresh tears.

“Thank you, Ruth,” she said. “What ever would I do without you?”

Ruth laughed through her own tears.

“Well, I know that what we must do is

get everything ready for us to depart tomorrow,” she said.

“Yes,” Charlotte said, sounding more confident and decisive than she felt. “We must.”

Chapter 28

“Whoa, there,” Duncan said, holding up his hand to a dock worker. One of the boxes of cargo was swinging too wildly in the air, and Duncan feared that it would plummet onto the ship and shatter, spilling all the wine inside.

Watching the crate wobble made his stomach twist, and he forced himself to push away the memory that was surfacing in his mind. As painful as it was for him, he needed to push away all thoughts of Christine. It was his first real day of being involved in his

business again, and he could not afford any distractions.

The dock hands ceased their progress at once and stabilized the crate. Once it was nearly still, Duncan motioned for them to continue lowering it.

“My lord,” one of the dock hands said. “It looks as though we may run out of room on the ship.”

Duncan stared at him, confused.

“What do you mean, run out of room?”

he asked.

“Well,” the dock hand said, looking nervous. “There is twice the normal amount being shipped out, because the last shipment was pushed back, due to . . .” The dock hand trailed off.

Duncan winced. The man did not need to finish what he was about to say. Duncan knew well why the last shipment had been delayed.

It was because he had shirked his business duties, including tending to the shipment orders that went out once or twice a month. And of course, it had not occurred to him that such a problem would ever arise, or to plan for such an event.

“How much room is left?” he asked the man, trying to stall for time.

The dock hand looked at the ship, then back to the unloaded cargo.

“If I had to guess,” he said. “I’d say we could load another seven or eight crates, at most.”

Duncan cursed silently. How could he have been so careless? And how could he fix the problem now?

“How quickly can we prepare a second ship?” he asked.

The dock hand looked relieved.

“There is one that was just unloaded, over there,” he said, pointing to a ship beside theirs. “It should be ready within an hour.”

Duncan, too, felt relief.

“Very good,” he said. “Set some workers about putting the extra cargo on that ship.”

The man smiled and trotted off to comply with Duncan’s request. Duncan turned his back to the dock hands and the freight, so that no one would see his shaken expression.

That had been a close call, and, when he returned home that evening, Duncan knew he would have to work doubly hard to ensure that no such incidents occurred in future. He was just beginning to regain the trust of his men and repair the recent botched business deals, and he could not afford a single mistake.

“Excuse me,” a voice said from behind Duncan.

He started and turned around quickly to find himself face-to-face with one of his business connections.

“Mr. Larson,” he said. “Good day. How are you?”

Paul Larson looked at Duncan, a confused smirk on his face.

“Did you forget about our meeting today?” he asked.

Duncan froze. He scrambled through his thoughts, trying to recall scheduling a meeting with anyone that day. He typically did not arrange any meetings or obligations on the days that cargo was being shipped or received. He thought hard, but he could not remember any letters exchanged or any conversations had during the week that would have led to such a meeting.

“I apologize, Mr. Larson,” he said. “I suppose I did. I normally do not meet with people when I am dealing with cargo. Did I

write you a letter?"

Paul shook his head.

"No," he said. "Though, perhaps I should have. I spoke with Lady Helena, and she said that you would be here at about this time, and that you would be glad to meet with me. She said that she would let you know about our appointment."

Duncan's jaw tightened. *Mother*, he thought bitterly.

Duncan looked at the gentleman and smiled.

“I am sure that she has just been preoccupied and forgot to mention it to me,” he said, giving the man his best, carefree smile. “What was it that you wanted to discuss?”

Before Paul could respond, the two men heard shouts coming from the crew handling the cargo. Duncan gave Paul an apologetic

smile.

“This is why I don’t usually take meetings when I am needed here,” he said. “Is there any way we can arrange to meet later this evening, or perhaps tomorrow?”

Paul looked at Duncan, clearly baffled at Duncan’s apparent ineptitude. Duncan winced, cursing his mother silently. He was going to have to speak with her about arranging his meetings. By that, he meant that he was going to tell her, in no uncertain terms, never to do

such a thing again.

“I do apologize,” Duncan said, trying to widen his smile. “It would seem that Mother forgot that I needed to oversee a shipment today. I assure you, however, that I will correct this issue, and I will attend to our business as soon as my cargo is loaded.”

“Very well,” Paul said. “The matter can wait until you are available to discuss it further.”

Duncan shook his hand.

“I will write to you this evening to reschedule, you have my word,” he said.

The gentleman nodded, then excused himself and walked away. Duncan rubbed his face with his hands, vowing that he would do whatever it took to force his mother to stay out of his business ventures, unless he specifically asked for her help.

As he tried to compose himself and

regain his focus, he saw a familiar blue dress moving slowly through a cluster of people standing a few feet ahead of him. At first, he resisted the urge to turn and look, recalling the mistake he had made at the ball. Then, he saw the face of the woman wearing the dress. He started trotting toward her before he was aware that he was moving.

“Christine,” he called, trying to push past the people standing between them.

She did not hear him and continued

walking. He broke through the crowd just as she moved past him.

“Christine!” he called again, completely ignoring the people who were now staring at him as he shouted after her. He saw Ruthie trailing slowly behind Christine, but she did not lift her head toward him.

This time, Christine heard him, and she turned around. Her mouth fell open, and she stopped walking when she spotted him. He rushed toward her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Where are you going?”

She opened her mouth to speak, but a gruff voice interrupted her.

“Excuse me,” a lanky man with a heavy French accent said. “I don’t believe we have met.”

Duncan looked at the man, who smelled strongly of liquor, then back at Christine.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

Christine looked down at the ground.

Duncan noticed how sad and defeated she looked, and his heart broke for her. He wished more than anything that he had not banished her from his home. He started to reach for her, but the man stepped between them.

“If you will excuse us, sir,” the man said.

“We are boarding that ship to France at once.”

Duncan's heart stopped.

“A ship to France?” he echoed. He looked at Christine. “Why?”

She looked back up at him. There were no tears in her eyes, but her pain was clear in her expression.

“Lord Willeton,” she said, stepping beside the French man. “This is Comte Francois. He and I are leaving to be wed in France.”

Duncan stared dumbly, unable to believe what he had just heard. He glanced toward Ruthie, who was now a few paces closer, but was still trailing behind the couple. She was looking at him, her eyes sad and dark.

“You are marrying him?” he asked, feeling as though someone had knocked the breath out of him.

Christine nodded, her face becoming sadder as she did so.

“Yes,” she said softly.

Duncan felt panic rising within him. He had made the mistake of letting her go once. He could not risk doing so again.

“No,” he said, his voice pleading. “Please, do not go. You must stay here.”

The Comte moved to put his arm around Christine. Duncan saw her flinch away from him, then quickly avert her gaze. When the Comte made a second attempt to touch her,

she remained still, but her face was full of misery. Duncan felt his blood heating, and he considered grabbing her hands and leading her away from the man.

When Christine looked up again, there were tears in her eyes. Duncan felt sick, seeing her in so much distress, and he felt responsible for whatever predicament she was in now.

“I cannot stay,” she said, her voice quivering. “My father promised my hand in marriage to Comte Francois when I was

sixteen. I was supposed to board a ship to France the day that I met you, but . . .,” she trailed off.

“It was merely a mistake, *Cherie*,” the Comte said, cutting Christine off as she spoke. “Let us think or speak no more of it.”

Duncan’s eyes grew wide. Suddenly, everything made perfect sense to him. The reason why Christine and her maid had tried to stowaway in the crate, the need for her to change her identity, her secrecy, her reaction

in the theater. She had been trying to hide from her family and escape a betrothal to this man. Based on what Duncan could see, she had been right to do so.

Duncan felt more compelled than ever to save her. He stepped toward her, ignoring the tall, crude man beside her.

“You do not have to do this,” he said.

“Please, just take some time to think about it.”

Christine shook her head slowly. The

Comte stood by, smirking smugly, which infuriated Duncan.

“I was punished for not doing as I was supposed to,” she said. “I do not have a choice. I must go with the Comte, as was agreed. I am so sorry.”

With that, the Comte put his arm briskly around her shoulders. Frozen in shock, Duncan struggled frantically to recall her real name. Before he could, however, the French man was pulling her away from him, and out

of his life for good.

Chapter 29

Charlotte watched Duncan's face fall as she rejected his pleas to stay. She had spent the previous weeks wanting nothing more than to see him, but now that he was trying to keep her near him, she felt nothing but emptiness. She still loved him, of course, but that didn't serve any purpose. She could love him for the rest of her days, but it would not prevent her marriage to Francois. This time the Comte was there in person to ensure that she boarded the ship to France. She was trapped, and not even Duncan could save her.

“I am truly sorry, Lord Willeton,” she said, ignoring the Comte and taking Duncan’s hand in hers. “I know that I hurt you, and I will carry that guilt with me forever. But I cannot stay, even to make things right, no matter how much I may wish to do so. I must do this. I only hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me.”

“What if I said that I was the one who was wrong?” Duncan pleaded. “What if I said that you have done nothing that requires

forgiveness, and that I will kneel on these very docks, begging for *your* forgiveness.”

Charlotte felt a lump in her throat. She understood that Duncan now realized her reasons for the lies and deception, and that he felt responsible for her predicament. The more he begged, the harder it was for her to stick to her resolve.

“I believe that you have done more than enough for my Charlotte,” the Comte said, trying and failing to step between Duncan and

Charlotte. “Thank you for ensuring that she was taken care of, until I could come here to escort her home, but she has me now, and your assistance is no longer required.”

Charlotte winced at the horrible emphasis the Comte put on the word *assistance*. Once more, she was reminded of Francois’ accusations about what had transpired between her and Duncan, and it made her angry. Yet even her anger was not enough to give her the courage to deny the Comte and tell him to board the ship alone.

Charlotte looked at Duncan with a heartbroken smile. She released his hand before Francois could step forward and intervene and motioned for Ruth to follow them. Duncan opened his mouth to say something, but she shook her head. She did not think she could bear hearing anything else he had to say. Her heart had already broken; if he said anything more, she was sure that her soul would fracture.

“Goodbye, Lord Willeton,” she said.

With a shudder, she took the Comte's arm, mostly in the hopes of taking his focus off Duncan, and the pair turned toward the ship. Charlotte fought the urge to turn and look back at Duncan. It was hard enough to leave him behind without looking back at the face of the man she wanted most in the world but could never have.

“Fine gentleman,” Francois murmured sarcastically, as they turned away. “I am not surprised that you were so taken with him.”

Charlotte's cheeks flushed a deep crimson, but she refused to acknowledge the Comte's remark. She knew enough about the man to know that causing a scene was precisely what he hoped for, and she would not give him the satisfaction. She could no longer rebel against their marriage, but she could deny him the drama on which he seemed to feed.

They had walked several paces when Charlotte felt a firm but gentle tug on her arm.

She glanced down, thinking that Ruth was fumbling to take her hand. But that was not the case. Someone else had her hand.

“Charlotte,” Duncan said.

Charlotte stopped mid-step, dumbfounded. Duncan had never called her by her real name. She turned to face him, too surprised to pull her hand from his. Truthfully, she did not wish to pull away from him.

“You will take your hand off of my

fiancée,” the Comte said. “You have no business touching her in such a manner.” He turned to Charlotte. “You have no business allowing a man to touch you at all.”

Instead of releasing Duncan’s hand, Charlotte squeezed it. She glared at the Comte wordlessly, resisting the urge to point out all the women the Comte had touched before her. Then she turned her attention back to Duncan.

Before speaking another word, Duncan got down on one knee. Charlotte put her free

hand over her mouth, knowing what Duncan was about to do.

“Charlotte, I love you, and I cannot imagine my life without you,” he said. “I cannot watch you board that ship and sail out of my life forever. I cannot lose you again. Please, say that you will marry me.”

Charlotte felt as though she might faint. For a moment she forgot about everything around her. All that existed in that moment was her and Duncan, and the proposal she had

dreamt of hearing from his lips. She stared into the eyes of the man she loved, the man who loved her, and saw that they were filled with tears that matched her own.

She looked up, not at Francois but at Ruth, who had closed the distance between them. Ruth's eyes were full of bright tears, and she had her hands clasped at her chest. The maid nodded fervently and bit her lip, silently pleading with Charlotte. She didn't need to say her plea aloud. Charlotte knew precisely what she must do.

Charlotte gently released Duncan's hand with a soft, sweet smile. Then, she turned to the Comte, putting her hand on his arm, which he was slowly drawing upward as if to strike Duncan.

"I am sorry, Francois," she said. "You and I would never have a happy marriage. I would never love you, and I am certain that you do not love me, either."

Francois looked at Charlotte with

reddened, wild eyes. He clutched her arm and held her firmly.

“What does love have to do with anything?” he asked. “You were promised to me, and I will have what is rightfully mine.”

Charlotte shook her head, pulling away from him. She positioned herself between the Comte and Duncan, who now looked as though he wanted to hit Francois.

“You were made a promise, but it was

not made by me,” Charlotte said defiantly. “It is time for me to start making my own decisions.”

Without waiting for a response from Francois, she turned back to Duncan, taking his hand once more.

“I love you too, Duncan,” she said. “I am truly sorry for all the pain I caused you.”

Duncan kissed her hand, tears now falling down his cheeks.

“If you will accept me as your betrothed now, all is forgiven and forgotten,” he said.

Charlotte laughed, seeing his eyes sparkle with the boyish humor that she had missed so much since being dragged from his home.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I will happily marry you.”

Duncan leapt from his kneeling position and put his hands on her waist. She could hear

Ruth giggle with delight, as Duncan twirled her around in a circle, the two of them laughing with sheer joy. When he finally put her gently down, she looked into his beautiful eyes, happier than she could remember being in many years. He leaned down, she raised her face to meet his, and they shared a sweet, soft kiss.

The Comte stormed up behind her and tried to grab her hand. Duncan moved swiftly, however, and gave Francois the same smug expression that had been on the Comte's face

just moments before.

“You will not touch my fiancée in such a way, my lord,” he said. Then, he gently took Charlotte’s hand in his and led her away from the docks, leaving Francois standing there, enraged.

Chapter 30

“Oh, dear,” Ruth said as Duncan led her and Charlotte away from the horrid French Comte, who was now yelling after them.

Duncan looked back, expecting to see the man following them. He was not, however. In fact, he looked as though he could barely stand.

“Your family will hear about this, you wench,” Francois shouted. “I will have what was promised to me.”

Duncan felt his blood heating again, but

he kept them moving away from the Comte.

“My parents will be furious,” Charlotte said.

Duncan looked over at her, but she did not look distressed. In fact, there was a flush to her cheeks, and her eyes were sparkling with an impish rebellion.

Duncan grinned at her.

“You will never have to see them again if

you do not wish to,” he said. “We are going back to my home, and they will not be permitted to take you away from me ever again.”

Charlotte beamed at him.

“You are too good to me,” she said.

Duncan paused just long enough to give Charlotte another sweet kiss.

“This is only the beginning,” he said.

The carriage ride back to his estate was a lovely one. Charlotte and Ruth chatted excitedly the entire way, and Duncan was happy to sit silently and just watch his dear Charlotte, holding her hand in his.

He could hardly believe that he had the opportunity to propose to her, and he would never have dreamed that she would say yes, after the way he had spoken to her the day the authorities took her away. He said a silent prayer of gratitude for the fortuitous turn of

events and vowed that he would never allow anything to separate the two of them again. Indeed, he planned to marry Charlotte right away, so that no one, and nothing, ever could.

As they pulled up to the estate, Duncan's heart sank when he saw his mother's carriage waiting in front of the house. He had planned to write to her of his plans, to avoid a confrontation between her and Charlotte. It was clear he would not have that option.

Charlotte also noticed the carriage, and

the color drained from her face. Duncan turned to her as the coach slowed to a stop, taking both of her hands in his.

“Do not worry,” he said. “I will never let her bother you again. I will take care of her.” He thought for a moment, not willing to subject Charlotte to the reaction Duncan was sure that his mother would have to the news. “Please, stay in the drawing room with Ruth. I will speak to my mother alone in the study.”

Charlotte started to protest, but he gently

put a finger to her lips.

“Please, darling,” he said, smiling at her warmly. “I can handle my mother, but I cannot handle seeing her upset you again.”

Charlotte looked at him for a moment. Then she smiled and nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “We will wait in the drawing room for you.”

Duncan kissed her hands and nodded.

“Good,” he said. He took a deep breath and helped Charlotte and Ruth out of the coach. Then he led them inside, as quietly as he could, and into the drawing room. He stroked Charlotte’s cheek and closed the door behind him. He squared his shoulders and went to his study.

The door to the room was open, and Helena was standing beside his desk, her arms folded. She looked at Duncan with narrowed eyes as he entered.

“Did I hear you arrive with company?”

she asked.

Duncan met her gaze firmly.

“No, Mother,” he said. “I did not.”

Helena smirked.

“Surely, you do not think me a fool,
darling,” she said. “I heard more than one set
of footsteps.”

Duncan maintained his gaze, standing up straighter, with a smirk of his own.

“I do not think you a fool,” he said. “But nor did I arrive with company. I arrived with my bride-to-be.” He paused for a moment, noticing that her face began to light up. “And her maid.”

Helena blinked in puzzlement, but only briefly. In an instant, her expression changed to one of barely concealed disgust.

“I trust that you do not mean that Beckner woman,” she said. She waved her hand in taunting dismissal. “Or whoever she really is.”

“Her name is Charlotte Hackney,” Duncan said, his tone as firm as his gaze. “And, yes, that is precisely who I mean.”

His mother’s eyes widened with anger. She put her hands on her hips and took a step toward Duncan.

“Are you mad?” she asked. “That woman is a criminal and a fraud.”

Duncan glared at her.

“If she is either of those things, it is because of you, Mother,” he said.

Helena’s mouth fell open in protest.

“It was not I who lied to you,” she hissed.

“It *was* you that brought the authorities into it. It matters not what a flower is called,” he said, thinking about one of his favorite plays. “What matters is its sweetness and beauty. Charlotte has both, and that is more than real enough for me. I will marry her, Mother, and that is final.”

Helena’s face reddened. She picked up a glass paperweight and threw it into a nearby bookcase. Then she turned to the desk, shoving stacks of papers onto the floor. Duncan stared in shock. He had known that

his mother would not take his news well, but he could never have imagined that she would be reduced to a childlike tantrum.

He stood and waited while his mother raged. When at last she turned to face him, breathing heavily from exertion, Duncan folded his arms and stared at her.

“Are you quite finished?” he asked, annoyed at his mother’s outburst.

“You absolutely will not marry that girl,”

Helena hissed, still panting. “I guarantee it.”

Through his annoyance, he smirked at his mother once more.

“You are behaving like a child, Mother,” he said. “So, I shall treat you like one.”

Helena stared at him silently, and Duncan was glad that he had dumbfounded her. He expected that what he said next would absolutely astound her. He was, at last, ready to properly stand up to her, because his love

for Charlotte was far greater than his desire to placate his mother. He took advantage of Helena's silence to deliver his ultimatum.

“You will either agree to make peace with my Charlotte,” he said, speaking each word slowly, as though he were, in fact, talking to an unruly child. “Or you will be entirely cut off and cut out of all business decisions. Permanently.”

Helena gasped loudly.

“You would not dare,” she said, fury beginning to build within her again. “I will never allow you to do any such thing, any more than I will allow you to marry that woman.”

Duncan scowled at her.

“I have every right to cut you out of my business dealings,” he said, thinking of his embarrassing conversation with Paul Larson. “I have a witness to the fact that you are completely unaware of my schedule, and that

you arrange meetings without my knowledge while I am previously obligated to attend to other business matters.”

Helena continued to glare at Duncan.

“I do what I feel is best, both for you and for the business,” she said.

“You are missing my point,” Duncan said, keeping his voice calm and careful. “You have no say in whom I love nor marry. Truthfully, you would likely be displeased with anyone I

chose. Heaven knows you scared off many women before Charlotte.”

Helena’s face fell, and Duncan thought she looked more of a child than she had during her tantrum.

“They were no good for you,” she said.
“*She* most certainly is not.”

“That is not for you to decide,” Duncan repeated. “Just as it would not be for me to decide whom you chose to marry.”

Helena snorted.

“As if I would ever remarry,” she said,
her voice full of disdain.

Duncan looked at her, an idea occurring to him. His mother had not even attempted to attract any men since his father had died, and he suddenly realized that it was part of the reason why she was so overly involved in his business and his life.

“Truthfully, I think that would be a marvelous idea, Mother,” he said thoughtfully. “It would give you a companion, and someone to help you with your portion of the business.” *Then, perhaps, you will stay out of mine,* he added silently.

Helena’s eyes widened once more.

“Are you ordering me to remarry now?” she asked, incredulous.

Duncan nodded.

“Indeed, I am,” he said.

Helena cackled, putting one hand on her chest.

“Or what, you will cut me off?” she asked. “You have already made that threat, Duncan.”

Duncan nodded.

“That still stands,” he said. “Now I am

telling you that you must find a suitor to marry within a fortnight.”

Helena stared at Duncan, her mouth agape once more. She seemed to be searching for some sort of retort, but she could find none.

“I believe that we are done here,” Duncan said. “I will have someone show you out.”

Helena stood there for a moment longer.

At last, she clenched her hands by her sides,
her face still red with anger.

“No, thank you,” she said curtly. “I will
show myself out.”

With that, she turned and stormed out of
the study, and shortly thereafter, out of the
front door.

Duncan straightened his jacket and took
a deep breath. He looked around the office at
the mess his mother had made. He called to a

passing maid, and apologetically requested
that she clean it up. Then he went to fetch
Charlotte.

Chapter 31

“Oh, Ruth,” Charlotte said as she heard the duchess storm out of the house. “What if she has upset Duncan again? What if my agreeing to marry him has made things worse?”

Ruth hugged Charlotte.

“He loves you,” she said soothingly. “He has told you so himself. He wants to marry you. I don’t think that anything his mother says or does is going to change his mind.”

Charlotte nodded.

“That is what I fear,” she said. “If she is displeased with his decision, what can she do to him?”

Ruth pushed Charlotte to arm’s length and looked at her.

“She cannot do anything to him,” she said. “Duncan is the duke and the head of the family. She cannot force him to do something

he does not wish to do, nor can she prevent him from doing what he wants. Trust me; everything will be alright.”

Just then, the door to the drawing room opened slowly. Charlotte approached the door, wringing her hands. Duncan entered, smiling at her. She ran over to him and took his hands.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

Duncan nodded and brushed a rogue

strand of hair from her face.

“Everything is fine, darling,” he said.

“My mother will not be a problem any longer.”

Charlotte’s brow furrowed.

“I do not wish to come between you and your mother,” she said.

Duncan shook his head.

“My mother has been the one coming between us,” he said. “It is she who creates the troubles between us. Our problems are because of her, not you.” He kissed her hand. “I was determined not to allow her to come between us any longer. You are the woman that I choose to marry, and she must come to terms with that.”

Charlotte smiled. Hearing him say the words made the entire world feel right. He seemed so happy and calm.

“Are you sure that you would not prefer Miss Christine Becker?” she teased.

Duncan’s eyes sparkled as he looked at her.

“I do not care if your name is Thomas John,” he said. “I adore you for who you are in here.” He gently pointed to her heart, and then tapped her lightly on her temple.

The three of them laughed.

* * *

The following days were the happiest of Charlotte's life. It felt strange, adjusting to life in Duncan's home as his betrothed, rather than his employee, but it was bliss. Ruth continued to serve as Charlotte's personal maid. One night, as Ruth helped Charlotte dress for bed, the maid suddenly embraced Charlotte fiercely.

"I am so happy for you," she exclaimed.

Charlotte laughed.

“What is all this about?” she asked.

Ruth beamed.

“I am just very proud of you,” she said.

“Rather than resign yourself to a life with the horrible Comte, you followed your heart.”

Ruth clasped her hands by her face and sighed. “It is like something out of a story book.”

Charlotte smiled and hugged her friend again.

“I am just glad that things are going well for you, too,” she said. “I cannot tell you how guilty I felt about the whole mess.”

Ruth giggled.

“Well,” she said. “At least we shall both have interesting stories to tell our children.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes.

“I think those stories are best forgotten, and never told to anyone,” she said with a laugh.

The next morning, Duncan knocked on the door to her room, just as Ruth had finished helping her dress. A kitchen maid followed carrying a tray laden with three plates of breakfast in her hands. Charlotte smiled warmly at the maid, as she set down the tray. The woman promptly curtsied and exited the room. She looked at Duncan and raised her

eyebrow.

“Oh, my,” she said. “What is all this about?”

Duncan’s smile was warm, but his eyes were pensive.

“I wanted to catch you early this morning so that I could speak to you about something,” he said.

Charlotte furrowed her brow.

“This sounds like bad news,” she said.

Duncan shook his head.

“Not precisely bad news,” he said. “Just, perhaps, a difficult subject.”

Charlotte bit her lip, ignoring the plates for the time being. She looked at Duncan and smiled.

“Well, I do love a challenge,” she said.

Her voice was light, but her stomach did a little flip. She was not sure what Duncan was about to say, but his tone worried her a little.

Duncan looked at her as he took up one of the plates, his eyes full of affection. Her heart swelled with love for him, and suddenly she felt as though she could handle any difficult news.

“I am glad,” he said, pushing his food around the plate. “Because I really would like to get your father’s blessing before we wed.”

Charlotte's heart stopped. The Comte's last words to her came rushing back, and she looked at Duncan with wide eyes.

“I do not believe that we will ever receive my parents' blessing,” she said. She had not realized until that moment that the idea of not having her parents at her wedding weighed heavily on her, especially now that she would be married in London, rather than across the sea in France.

Duncan put his plate aside and took her hand.

“I think I can make your father see reason,” he said. “If not, I will simply marry you anyway.”

Charlotte looked into Duncan’s eyes again. The love and confidence she saw there made her smile.

“Well,” she said. “I am prepared to try if you are.”

Duncan nodded.

“I would like to go this afternoon, if that is agreeable,” he asked.

Charlotte took a deep breath. She wasn’t prepared to face her father, but she knew it would be best to face the ordeal as soon as possible.

“That sounds perfect,” she said.

The day passed too quickly for Charlotte, and, before she knew it, she, Duncan, and Ruth were boarding the carriage to travel to her parent's home in Plymouth. Her stomach was in knots. She tried to keep herself calm, but she was terrified. Part of her feared that the Comte would still be on the estate, waiting to drag her to France if she should ever return to her family's home. However, she had Duncan now, and she knew that he would never allow such a thing to happen. She held onto that thought fiercely, as the carriage finally stopped at her parent's front door.

The butler greeted them warmly and led them inside. A moment later, Charlotte saw her parents slowly approach them where they stood in the entryway.

Charlotte held her breath as her parents moved toward her. When her mother drew closer, Charlotte could see that she was crying. Without warning, her mother rushed toward her and wrapped her arms around Charlotte.

“Oh, darling,” she whispered. “I was so

worried about you.”

Charlotte returned her mother’s embrace, both comforted and confused.

“I am quite well, Mother,” she said, releasing her mother. She opened her mouth to ask about the Comte, but she hesitated to broach the subject.

Her father stepped forward again, and Charlotte instinctively stepped back toward Duncan. His face was grim, and Charlotte

clasped her hands in front of her nervously.

But as her mother had done, the earl opened his arms and took his daughter into them.

“Charlotte,” he said, his voice rough with emotion. “Please, forgive me.”

Charlotte pulled back in utter surprise.

“What?” she began.

“The Comte was a terrible man,” her mother said quickly, interrupting her. “He

barged in here, ranting and raving and saying terrible things about you.”

Her father nodded solemnly.

“You were right about him all along, my dear,” he said. “He tried to fight with the butler when we had him escorted off our property. He refused to leave until he got what he came for, or enough money to make an even trade, and then he threw one of my crystal scotch bottles at your mother when we ordered him to leave.”

Charlotte stood staring at her parents in shock. She felt terrible for the things the Comte had done. She regretted that they had had to find out what kind of person Francois was in such a fashion. Her eyes filled with tears, and she hugged her father again.

“Can you ever forgive us, darling?” her father asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

She released her father just enough to hold out an arm to her mother, too. Her

mother joined them, and she hugged them both tightly, her heart full of love.

“Of course, I can,” she said.

From behind them, Duncan softly cleared his throat. Charlotte released her parents gently, then stepped back to allow Duncan to stand near them.

“Mother, Father,” Charlotte said, suddenly feeling nervous. “You remember Lord Willetton?”

Her mother and father curtsyed and bowed, respectively. When they looked at Duncan's face, both were smiling warmly.

“Of course,” her father said. “It is good to see you, Lord Willeton.”

Charlotte glanced up at her father's face and saw that he was smiling, and his eyes glinted with humor.

“I would like to apologize to you, but

mostly to Charlotte, for the way I behaved over that ordeal with the constables,” Duncan said sincerely.

To Charlotte’s surprise, the earl bowed his head and nodded.

“As do I,” he said. “I treated poor Charlotte shamefully, and she did not deserve it.”

Duncan smiled warmly at the earl.

“Well, perhaps there is a way that we can make it up to her,” he said.

The earl looked intrigued, and the sparkle had returned to his eyes. Charlotte suspected that he knew what Duncan was about to say, and she held her breath once more.

“I wish to marry Charlotte, and I would like your blessing,” he said.

The earl studied Duncan for a moment.

Suddenly, Duncan seemed as nervous as she felt.

The earl turned to look at his wife, and Charlotte could not help but follow suit. She was standing there, looking at Charlotte and Duncan with a dreamy smile on her face and tears in her eyes. She gave Charlotte's father a small nod, and he turned back to face the couple.

“Lord Willeton,” he said, emotion filling his voice once more. “I would be honored to

give you my blessing.”

Charlotte covered her mouth with her hands, tears of joy filling her eyes. Her mother rushed over to embrace her, as Duncan and the earl exchanged a hearty handshake.

“Oh, Father,” Charlotte said, releasing her mother to once more hug her father.

“Thank you so much. You have no idea how happy you have made me.”

The earl hugged his daughter tightly.

“You deserve all the happiness in the world, darling,” he said.

* * *

The surprises were not finished for the day. As Charlotte and Duncan arrived back at his home, they noticed a familiar carriage sitting out front. Charlotte looked at Ruth and then at Duncan, with wide eyes. Duncan took her hand. Without a word, they entered the house.

“You have guests, my lord,” the butler said, ushering the pair inside. “They are waiting for you both in the drawing room.” *They?* Charlotte thought.

Charlotte and Duncan exchanged another look. He gave her a reassuring smile, though his eyes told her that he was just as confused as she. Ruth followed them into the drawing room, moving to stand on the other side of Charlotte as soon as they entered. Charlotte tried to make sense of what she saw, but all

she could do was stare.

“Mother,” Duncan said. “What are you doing here?”

Helena stood and gestured to the gentleman sitting next to her to do the same.

“Duncan, darling,” she said. “I would like you to meet Nathaniel Travis, Earl of Frankton.”

Charlotte glanced at Duncan, trying to

read his reaction. His face showed his surprise, but he bowed and smiled politely.

“Good afternoon, Lord Frankton,” he said. “I am Duncan Lancaster, and this is my betrothed, Lady Charlotte Hackney.”

Lord Frankton bowed to both Duncan and Charlotte.

“Yes, Lord Willeton,” the gentleman said, his voice pleasant but cool. “Lady Helena has told me a great deal about you.” Then, the earl

turned to Charlotte. He took her hand and bowed once more. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Charlotte.”

Charlotte smiled, still confused, but comforted by the earl’s demeanor.

“It is wonderful to meet you, too, my lord,” she said, giving him a deep curtsy.

Duncan looked back at his mother, looking for an explanation.

“We come with news, Duncan,” Helena said.

Charlotte could not help but notice a decided difference in Helena’s own demeanor. She still stood rigidly, and her face was still firm, but her eyes were softer, and her tone had yet to take on any of the cold cruelty she customarily used.

“What news?” Duncan asked.

Helena looked at the earl, who smiled

warmly at her before turning back to Duncan.

“I have asked your mother to marry me,” Lord Frankton said. “I would like your blessing before making it official.”

Charlotte covered her mouth with her hands. Helena, getting married? It would certainly explain the changes in the duchess. She quickly put her hands back down at her sides and bit her lip. She was still keenly aware that Helena despised her, and she did not wish to incur the duchess’s wrath,

especially when she was bringing such happy news.

Duncan looked at the earl, surprised. He looked at his mother, a small smile forming on his face.

“Is this what you want, Mother?” he asked. “It is,” she said. “We have known each other for some time, and we have become better acquainted over the past few days.”

Duncan looked at his mother for another

moment. Then he embraced her gently before turning his attention back to the earl.

“Today seems to be a day for happy news, indeed,” Duncan said. He held out his hand to the earl and smiled brightly. “You have my warmest blessing, my lord.”

Helena looked at the earl and smiled. She wore a strange expression on her severe face, but Charlotte could not help smiling, too. Then, Helena turned her gaze to Charlotte, and Charlotte’s blood ran cold.

Helena stepped toward Charlotte, and she had to resist every urge in her body that screamed at her to run. Helena seemed to sense her tension and did not move closer. The duchess folded her hands gently at her waist and looked at Charlotte intently.

“Lady Charlotte,” Helena said. Her voice was not precisely warm, but it was not cold and cutting.

Charlotte held her breath, unable to

Speak.

“I have been a terrible shrew to you,” she said. “I do not expect your forgiveness, but I would like to formally apologize to you for the horrible way I treated you. I am truly sorry.”

Charlotte blinked. Had she heard Helena correctly? Was she apologizing?

Charlotte did not realize that she still had not spoken until Duncan nudged her gently with his arm. She looked up at his brilliant

smile, drawing courage from his warmth.

“I accept your apology, Lady Helena,”

Charlotte said, giving her a small curtsy.

“And I wish to extend my sincere

congratulations to you on your betrothal.”

Helena curtsied to Charlotte, which

surprised her further.

“I would like to congratulate the both of

you, too,” Helena said.

Charlotte's mouth fell open. She cursed herself for being so silly, but she could not make her mouth close. She felt as though she were dreaming. Could this really be happening?

“Do you mean it, Mother?” Duncan asked, sounding as surprised as Charlotte felt.

Helena nodded, taking one of Duncan's hands in hers.

“If she is the woman who makes you

happy, then I completely support your decision,” she said.

For the first time, Charlotte felt the urge to hug Helena. However, she knew that this was the first tiny step on the long road to a warmer relationship with her, and so she resisted. Instead, she simply curtsied again and smiled warmly at the duchess.

“Thank you very much, Lady Helena,” she said.

Chapter 32

“Can you believe it?” Charlotte said, as soon as Helena and Lord Frankton left.

Duncan shook his head.

“I spoke with my mother about her remarrying,” he admitted. “But I did not expect her to choose a suitor so soon.”

Charlotte looked at him with a smirk.

“Did you tell her that she must remarry?”

she teased.

Duncan nodded.

“I did,” he said. “I felt that, if she could find her own happiness, she would not be so quick to object to ours.”

Charlotte nodded thoughtfully.

“Well, it seems as though you were right,” she said.

“Yes, it does,” Duncan said, giving her a gentle kiss on her cheek. “I could not be happier.”

Charlotte beamed at Duncan, and his heart warmed.

“Well, shall we begin the official plans for our wedding?” she asked.

Duncan’s smile widened at the excited shine in her eyes. For the first time since he had known her, Charlotte looked truly happy,

and he felt that he could not love her more.

“We certainly shall,” he said.

He watched as Ruth and Charlotte left the drawing room, talking excitedly as they went to Charlotte’s bedroom. He sat down in one of the chairs and let the events of the day wash over him. Never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that the day would turn out as it had. Everything in his life was right, and he could not be happier.

The next couple of weeks flew by as Charlotte finalized their wedding plans. He agreed to every request or suggestion that Charlotte made, because he wanted her to have the most amazing wedding day that she could possibly imagine.

On the day Charlotte had gone into town with Ruth to commission her wedding dress, there was a knock on the door. Duncan was looking over some business plans in his study with the door open, so he was aware of the visitor. He exited his office before the butler

announced the guest. For the first time in as long as he could remember, Duncan smiled when he saw his mother come into the entryway. He noticed with curiosity that she was holding a small box in her hands.

“Good morning, Mother,” Duncan said.

Helena gave her son a small but sincere smile.

“Good morning, darling,” she said. “How are the wedding plans coming along?”

Duncan smiled. He had to admit that Lord Frankton was having a positive effect on his mother, and Duncan was very grateful. Lord Frankton himself was a friendly and respectable man, and Duncan looked forward to formally welcoming the gentleman into his family.

“They are going very well,” Duncan said. “Charlotte is preparing to go to the seamstress for her dress as we speak.”

Helena's eyes lit up, an expression that was completely foreign to Duncan.

“Oh, could I speak with her before she leaves?” the duchess asked, holding up the box she was carrying.

Duncan blinked in surprise. His mother being civil toward Charlotte had been quite a surprise. He had not expected the change to happen so rapidly, but he was pleased that it had occurred.

“I don’t see why not,” he said, glancing at the box she held. “Is that a wedding present for us?”

Helena put a hand protectively over the box.

“It is for Charlotte,” Helena said, shooing Duncan away from the box.

Duncan laughed.

“Well,” he said, “I am sure that she

would love to see you before they leave for town. She is in her room, I believe.”

Helena dipped her head and gave Duncan another small smile.

“Thank you, darling,” she said, as she sashayed up the stairs.

Duncan turned to go back into the study, but he changed his mind just as he reached the doorway. He wanted to tell Charlotte goodbye before she left, and, truthfully, he

was curious about what was in that box.

The minutes dragged on, but at last Charlotte, Ruth, and Helena emerged from Charlotte's room and descended the stairs. The three women were smiling and engaged in enthusiastic conversation. Charlotte beamed, reaching for him as she touched the bottom step. She took his hands and kissed his cheek.

“We are all off to the seamstress's,”
Charlotte said.

Duncan started to smile broadly back at her. Then, his brow furrowed.

“All of you?” he asked, looking at his mother.

“Yes,” Helena said. Duncan thought he detected a slight flush to her cheeks. “I will need a new dress for your wedding, and I would like to begin considering my own wedding dress.”

Charlotte looked at Duncan, her eyes

shining with excitement. It wasn't until the women had closed the door behind them that he realized he had forgotten to ask about the box that Helena had given Charlotte.

Epilogue

Duncan did not see much of Charlotte in the week leading up to the wedding. She was constantly busy, either having last-minute alterations made to her gown or going into town to finalize wedding plans. Nevertheless, the brief moments that Duncan did spend with her were pure bliss, and he found himself saying prayers of gratitude every night as he drifted off to sleep.

The night before the wedding, he and Charlotte dined alone. They had invited Helena to join them, but she had declined. She had plans to attend the theater and then take a carriage ride through the park with Lord Frankton that evening.

Duncan watched Charlotte, looking for any indication that she was nervous about the wedding the following day, or that she was having second thoughts.

Charlotte looked up from her dinner and

caught him staring at her. She blushed and giggled.

“What is it?” she asked.

Duncan smiled slyly, seizing an opportunity that he had thus far missed, with her being so busy.

“What was in the box my mother gave you?” he asked.

Charlotte looked at him in mock horror.

“What makes you think she did not swear me to secrecy?” she teased.

Duncan laughed.

“Knowing my mother, that is entirely possible,” he said.

Charlotte shook her head.

“Shame on you,” she said, still smiling.
Instead of answering him, she slowly took a

bite of her dinner.

Duncan sighed with exaggerated exasperation.

“Are you going to keep me in suspense?”
he asked.

Charlotte giggled.

“Well,” she said, feigning indignance. “If you must know, it was a lovely silver brooch. She said that her mother gave it to her for her

wedding day, and she wanted me to have it.”

Duncan’s mouth fell open. He knew that brooch. It was the one his mother had worn every day until his father died. That brooch meant the world to Helena, and for her to give it to Charlotte meant something.

“Oh, my,” Duncan said. “It seems as though you have won over my mother, after all.”

Charlotte laughed again.

“Why not?” she asked. “I won you over,
did I not?”

Duncan laughed along with her.

“Yes,” he said. “But I dare say that I
stood less of a chance than she did.”

Charlotte covered her mouth, feigning
horror.

“Are you saying that entrapped you?” she

asked, her eyes sparkling.

Duncan nodded fervently.

“And I could not be happier that you did,” he said.

* * *

Duncan could not get to the church quickly enough the next morning. He departed before Charlotte, so that she could finish preparing without him seeing her in her gown.

He stood at the church, hardly able to sit still as he waited for her arrival.

At last, the few guests they had invited began to arrive, as did his mother and Lord Frankston. Before Duncan took his place at the altar, Helena enveloped her son in a warm embrace.

“I am so proud of you,” she whispered, as she kissed his cheek.

He released his mother to see that tears

were slipping down her cheeks. Duncan could recall seeing his mother cry only once in his life, when his father had died. He wiped away a tear and kissed her cheek in return.

“Thank you, Mother,” he said. Then he went to await the wedding procession and the arrival of his bride.

Moments later, Charlotte appeared at the doors of the chapel. Duncan’s heart stopped. She looked like an angel. He stared in awe at her as she made her way down the aisle.

The veil blocked her face, but when it was time for him to lift it, his expression of admiration turned to one of joy and bliss. She had a smile that easily rivaled his, and, in that moment, he knew that she was every bit as delighted to marry him as he was to marry her. As the vicar pronounced them husband and wife, he leaned down and gave her a soft, gentle kiss.

“My wife,” he said softly. “I could not be happier.”

He did not realize that he was crying
until Charlotte reached up and wiped away a
tear.

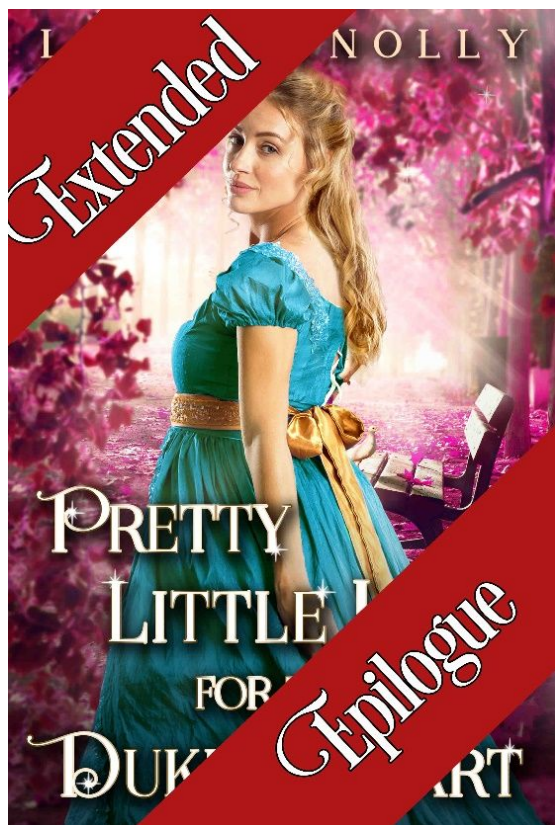
“Nor could I, my love,” she said.

The Extended Epilogue

I want to thank you with all my heart for reading my novel “**Pretty Little Lies for the Duke's Heart**”!

Would you like a sneak peek in Charlotte and Duncan’s future?

Click on the image or the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a BONUS, I will send you the Extended Epilogue of this Book!



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The Mystery of the Broken Duke

Prologue

1813

Clara Burke dabbed at the corner of her eyes, wiping away the tears that had escaped as she laughed. If she moved too suddenly, she could feel her ribs hurting.

The other women who were with her were laughing still, unable to recover just yet. Lady Conworth was very amusing, and, as always when they gathered, at the end, she had sent them into a fit with her words.

“Surely, it could not be that horrible,” Clara said, putting her handkerchief away.

“Oh, believe me, it is,” Lady Conworth replied, being the only one who never seemed to be amused by her own words. “Imagine being married to such a broody, gloomy man. Oh, my goodness, I would surely die of boredom!” She rolled her eyes theatrically, and the women were laughing again.

They had gathered in the Teahouse today

for tea and, of course, idle gossip. Every week, there was always some news to discuss.

It was summer after all, a long time until a new season, and something had to be done to while the time away.

Clara was aware of her husband's aversion to this activity, but she always assured him that it was nothing vicious or bitter.

Nathaniel, her husband, had finally come

to accept that and, these days, when she entertained the women or went out to be entertained, he let her do so with a sigh that showed he was resigned to his fate.

He was smitten with her, after all, and could refuse her nothing. Nathaniel was such a good husband, and Clara was just as smitten with him.

She felt her cheeks begin to warm at the thought of him and the love they shared, and she wondered if anyone noticed.

“Oh, Clara, I daresay we have lost you. Have you heard any word that has been said in the past minute? Of course not. Someone is thinking of her dear husband again.” That was Lady Whitestalk.

At her words, Clara blushed deeper, shifting in her seat.

So, they did notice.

The fourth of the ladies, Lady Greenwich,

spoke then. “Oh, leave the woman be, Essence. If I were married to such a man as Lord Burke, I would always have my cheeks smudged with hints of crimson, as he would be in my thoughts all the time!”

Once again, they laughed. Clara too, for she knew Lady Greenwich meant well.

“His Grace is just as wonderful a man, Olivia. Mind your husband, and I shall mind mine. Speaking of husbands, I’m afraid I shall have to take my leave now. I promised my

lord I would be back in time to take Eva off his hands, so that he can concentrate on other matters. If you would excuse me for a moment, I shall visit the powder room.”

Clara rose as she finished speaking, and the women nodded their understanding.

She found the powder room soon enough and took her time to readjust her hair. Satisfied with the improvement, she turned to leave.

She was no more than ten steps away from the tea- room when a large figure stopped in front of her, blocking her way.

She halted in her tracks and raised her head to see who it was. Her heart fell as she recognized him.

“My lord,” she greeted him, bowing her head slightly.

“My lady, I thought that was you,” he replied, his deep baritone sending a

frightening chill down her spine. “I saw you as you left the tea-room moments ago, but I wasn’t sure if my eyes had deceived me. So, I came out here to wait.”

Clara forced a smile onto her face, swallowing hard.

“Oh, I see. What a surprise, seeing you here. I did not think this was your kind of place.”

He smiled at her in that odd way that

had lately made her feel extremely uncomfortable.

“The library is just across the street. I have been there all day. But I decided to break off for a few minutes, so I came here for some tea. The Teahouse is, after all, open to everyone, lord or lady.”

“That it is. Very well then, I hope you enjoy your break. I must be on my way.” She lifted her skirts, eager to keep moving, but he stopped her.

“You are not leaving so quickly, are you?”

She stopped, growing wearier by the moment.

“Is there something else you wish to discuss, my lord? My apologies, I did not realize.”

He broke into a soft laugh that did not make Clara feel any better. It sounded like

something that would come from the devil himself.

“Oh, Clara, you delight me!” He took a step forward, closing what little distance was between them.

Clara’s feet shuffled backwards of their own accord. She glanced around, nervous, worried that they might be drawing attention to themselves. A sigh of relief broke free from her lips as she saw that no one appeared to be paying them any attention.

He snorted at that, and she jerked her head to face him again.

She thought he would move forward again, but he didn't. Outwardly, she tried to look as calm as possible, not wanting to give him any satisfaction by revealing how much his mere presence upset her.

“Yes, my lord?”

“It is not something of grave importance,

per se. I was just wondering if you have thought any further about my proposition.”

“I have given you my answer, my lord. I gave it to you the very moment you asked, and I made it clear that there is nothing more to discuss.”

“And I made it clear that I will not take no for an answer...”

“I am afraid you must. There is no other way about it. What you ask of me is highly

inappropriate, considering the fact that I am a married woman and, beyond that, married to ...”

“Oh, please, Clara. Stop with the theatrics. No one will ever find out. You have not told Nathaniel thus far, and I am certain you never will. We can keep it a secret.” He took another step forward.

This time, she stood her ground, digging her heels in. She would not be intimidated.

“Not if you keep approaching me this way, we cannot. Look at us. We are in the open, and there are eyes everywhere. Not to mention, you are too close for comfort. It is only a matter of time until rumors begin to fly.”

His brows wiggled in excitement. “Would you rather we chose a private rendezvous place?”

She raised her own brows at him, frowning now. He got the meaning of her

gesture and cleared his throat, becoming serious again.

“No one would think anything of it ... us being together like this. We have always been close, your family and I.”

“I am beginning to see that this is a mistake that should have never been made, is it not? My lord, I do not know what has come over you, but you must stop this nonsense before it gets out of hand. I cannot be yours.”

He lost his calm in that moment, his smile disappearing as his eyes grew dark.

“You speak as a silly child. Naive, fresh out of her lesson room, with no knowledge of how the world operates. However, you and I both know that you are far more sensible than these words you speak. We could make it a reality, Clara. You need only say yes.”

“I do not want this! I will never say yes. This, us, it is madness, and it will never happen! I do not know what malady has come

over you, but I suggest you overcome it as soon as possible, as it is denying you of your right senses. Now, if you would step aside, I have kept my friends waiting for long enough, and I need to go home to my husband and my child, my family!” She said the last words with emphasis, her blue eyes hard as she held his.

She was exasperated by his audacity. By the thought that he felt he had any right to be angered.

She could feel several pairs of eyes on

them now and knew that they had finally managed to draw attention. Yes, he had been right. They might think nothing of it, but if this continued, it was certain to raise dust. Just then, someone cleared their throat, and they both turned to see Cecilia, her maid, standing by his side.

“Cecilia!” Clara chimed, aware that this was her saving bell.

“My lady, I have brought your belongings and said farewell to your friends on your

behalf. Time strays further away from us by the minute. I am afraid we cannot keep His Grace waiting any longer.”

Smiling victoriously at the timely intervention of her maid and friend, Clara responded.

“Thank you, Cecilia. That was very thoughtful of you. His lordship and I were simply exchanging pleasantries. We had just finished as you arrived. We may take our leave now.”

She tore her gaze away from Cecilia to the tall man in front of her. He still had not moved an inch.

“My lord, do have a lovely evening.”

“You too, my lady. Until we meet again.”

The twinkling mischief in his eyes told Clara that he had every intention of making certain that another meeting happened, and, as she turned to leave, with Cecilia by her

side, she could feel those eyes roaming across every inch of her body.

She shuddered in disgust and wondered if she was right in keeping this from her husband.

It had been three months since it had begun. When *he* had begun. When she had presumed he was jesting. As she grew to learn that he was serious, she believed he would grow weary and stop.

How much longer could she continue to manage the situation herself and keep him at bay?

“He was disturbing you again, my lady, was he not?”

Cecilia’s voice drew her out of her thoughts as they stepped out of the Teahouse.

Her handmaiden was the only other person who knew what had been happening, for she was Clara’s dearest confidante.

Clara smiled, not wanting to worry the girl. “Never worry yourself, Cecilia. ‘Tis nothing I cannot manage.”

At least, not for much longer, she thought to herself.

But what Clara did not know was that it would not matter anyway, as she would be dead within two months...

Chapter 1

Two Months Later...

“We must be assured in God’s promises, believing that a good soul has been taken up and now rests in His bosom. May this bring peace to our aggrieved hearts, knowing that she is now in a better place. For it is written, from dust we have come, and thereunto, we shall return.”

Nathaniel stood watching as they lowered the casket that contained his heart,

his world, his whole life.

His wife, the mother of his child.

The vicar's voice droned in his ears, but the words sounded so distant, as if everything was far away, so that he could barely hear a thing.

He felt empty inside. Terribly empty.

He could not believe it. It had been four days since she closed her eyes for the last time

in his arms, and, until now, he had been waiting to wake up from this cruel nightmare.

To have her smile down at him, tell him that it had only been a bad dream. Now, it had finally become clear that that would never happen.

She was gone. His light was gone, throwing him into darkness that would surround him for as long as he lived.

And what was the point of living?

It was not right. It was not right that she should leave so soon. That he would have to live without her. They had made so many plans, believing that they would live out all their years together.

Grow old and gray. Have more children and grandchildren.

That had been their dream.

Yet here he was, doomed to live in this

nightmare, alone.

His eyes were heavy with tears, but he could not let them flow. Not yet, with everyone present. He had been unable to cry since she breathed her last. Unable to do anything else, the shock rendering him useless.

Thankfully, his mother had risen to the occasion and taken charge of the funeral preparations.

It was only now, watching her laid to rest, that he was starting to feel the full force of the ugly, painful sorrow that plagued his soul.

He shuddered as they began to cover the grave, and the thought of jumping in took hold of his mind.

This was real.

Only a year ago, they had laid his father, Nathaniel Burke Senior, Duke of Wimsley, to

rest in this same field, with this same vicar,
and this same crowd.

He had felt lost, aware that his life had
changed forever. That he now had new
responsibilities, duties that he was expected to
fulfill.

The only difference was that Clara had
been by his side, holding his hand, crying,
even as she dried his tears. She had helped
him find his way again.

Now, she was the one who had left. How could he ever recover from her loss?

How would he ever find his way out of his darkness? A darkness thicker and more powerful than any he had ever found himself sunk in before.

He felt a hand on his shoulder, and he turned to look at his side. He met the gaze of his best friend, Peter Kinsley, Earl of Ensworth.

Peter said no words, but Nathan understood. Nathan could read those words in his eyes, the consolation he meant to offer. He could feel the strength he was being given from the squeeze on his shoulder, and he held on to it.

He nodded. Just then, he felt soft, tiny fingers lock with his. He turned to his left, to see his daughter looking up at him.

There were no tears in her eyes. She looked confused.

Slowly, he felt his heartbeat return to his chest, filling the void that had been there. Oh, but it did not make things any better.

It only made his pain intensify, as his heart broke into a million pieces at the sight of her. She was so much like her mother. So much so that it hurt to look at her.

The thought almost made him chuckle.

Fate had played a cruel trick on him. It

had taken away the woman he loved with all his being and left behind the girl he would give his life for, cursed to behold her as she grew day by day into the image of the woman he had lost.

How was he to recover from this, when a constant reminder of her stared back at him every day?

It was just as well that his mother had agreed to take the child to her home at the Wimsley estate. There, she would raise her

until he finally had the strength to look at her without becoming distraught.

Until he was finally ready to be the father she deserved. A father who would raise her with love and joy, not pain and sorrow.

He knew his daughter did not understand what was happening, not entirely. He would never be able to explain it to her because he had not been able to fully grasp it himself.

All he knew was that he was broken, and

that he did not have any strength left in him.

Even breathing felt like a chore.

Yet he knew he could not simply give up.

He had to fight. Though Clara was gone, there still was something to live for. His mother, the beautiful child he had made with Clara, the dukedom of Wimsley.

Altogether, they did not hold a candle to his late wife, but they mattered, nonetheless.

For them, he would remain strong and

fight the tears, and when he was safe in the privacy of his chamber, alone in the bed he once shared with his lost love, he would let himself go to pieces.

He would let the tears flow and mourn her. Mourn a loss that could never be restored or replaced.

Soon, the funeral was over, her grave completely covered, sealing her away from him forever.

The vicar's voice ceased its droning then,
and the congregation chorused.

“Amen.”

One by one, people walked up to him,
offering their condolences.

Nathaniel stood, nodding, accepting
handshakes, bowing his head. Words of
appreciation flowed from his mouth, but all of
it felt as though he was elsewhere.

Soon, the mourners were all gone, save for Peter.

“I cannot claim to understand your pain, dear friend. I cannot even imagine...” he began.

Nathaniel simply nodded.

“I just want you to know that this is a loss felt by all of us. Clara was the most beautiful soul I have ever met in my lifetime. She was a blessing to us all. I know it seems

unfair, but God called back his angel, for that is what she was. She never should have gone so soon. Goodness..." Peter paused as he trembled, his own pain taking hold of him.

Nathaniel watched as one tear slipped free and his friend rushed to wipe it away. Nathaniel knew that the pain Peter felt was real. Peter had loved Clara as his own sister, for both men were like brothers.

"Nevertheless, we must find comfort, Nathan. We must find comfort in the

knowledge that she is in heaven now and that she is looking down at us, with all the love in her heart. She will always be here, in our hearts. She lives on, in our memories. Always and forever. She shall be missed, but you are not alone. I, your mother, your little girl, Eva ... we are all here to support you and help you with whatever you need.”

Those were the first words that Nathan had actually heard that evening, and he found himself extremely grateful for them.

True, they did nothing to ease the pain in his heart, but, at the very least, he did not feel so alone anymore.

“Thank you, Peter. You have always been a wonderful friend.”

“No less than you have been to me. We shall be waiting in the house. Come in whenever you are ready.”

Nathaniel gave a curt nod, and, at that, Peter turned to leave.

He spun, so that he faced the grave,
grateful for this moment of silence and
solitude, at last.

Now that he was alone with his Clara, he
could talk to her.

He opened his mouth, aware that he had
so much to say, but no words came; none at
all.

He tried again, but it remained the same.

Not even a whisper fell.

Frustrated, he clamped his mouth shut and just stood there, hands in his pockets as tears flowed down his cheeks.

Yes, he had said this would only happen in the privacy of his chambers, but he could no longer hold back.

He was in pain. Hurting so much that breathing seemed difficult.

It was not supposed to be this way.

He closed his eyes, squeezing out more tears, as he let his mind take him under the waves of a sea of memories.

The first day he had met her ... her smile that had captured him and held him spellbound. Those beautiful eyes he could never find himself in, always lost ... he had always been lost in them.

Her laughter that filled the air like the

sweetest of harmonies and her wild, wavy,
golden locks that bounced as she walked,
flowing halfway down her back.

Her pale skin and shapely lips, the color
of sunset.

She had been so beautiful. Utterly
gorgeous.

He had savored every moment spent with
her, precious moments that he would cherish
even more now.

Her fierce spirit, her pure heart, her gentle soul, and her spunk. Her head never went past his shoulders, yet she had stood up *to* him, *for* him, and *by* him, more than anyone he had ever known.

She had been everything and more.

He knew must, but how would he ever live without her?

So lost in his thoughts was he that

Nathan did not hear the footfalls of the man creeping up on him until his voice startled him.

“My lord, please, accept my condolences.”

Nathan’s eyes flew open, and, as he turned to look at the man, his vision blurred by tears, he sought the handkerchief in his pocket.

He found it quickly and hurriedly wiped

his face clean of every hint of tears. He took a very good look at the man, wondering if they had met before.

“Thank you, sir. Do I know you?”

Clara had been laid to rest in the field in his manor. This meant they were on private property, and only family and friends had been invited.

So, how had this stranger gotten in?

“I am afraid you do not, Your Grace.

However, I was acquainted with your late wife. She was a dear friend.”

Nathan knew all Clara’s friends, and he was positive he had never met this man. He looked him over. He was a small man dressed in fine clothing and appeared to be gentry.

He did not look as though he could cause any harm, but Nathan grew wary of him.

“I see. And who might you be?”

“Gregory Brighton, Your Grace. I only wanted to pay my respects to Lady Clara and offer my condolences.”

He dipped into a bow and rose so gracefully, it appeared effortless.

“Mr. Brighton, thank you for your presence and your condolences. They are very much appreciated. Clara would have been happy that all her friends came to bid her farewell today.”

Nathan's voice was hoarse from his tears, so he cleared his throat, already embarrassed that Mr. Brighton had caught him crying.

He gave a curt nod. "You have done well. I suppose if we ever run into each other again, I shall take care to say hello."

It was a dismissal, a clear one for that matter, but as Nathan turned to face the grave again, he noticed that the man had not moved an inch.

“I meant to say that you may take your leave now, sir. As you saw, I would like to have a quiet moment.”

“Pardon my intrusion, Your Grace. It is only ... there is a matter of grave importance I wish to discuss with you. I am not certain this is the time or place. However, I know that it is something that must be said.”

There was an urgency to the man's voice that arrested Nathan's attention. Once again,

Nathan turned to him.

“No, I suppose this is neither the time nor place, but if it is of such grave importance, then you may speak freely ... unless it is a matter of business. If so, then you must return in at least a fortnight from now. It would be disrespectful to speak of such matters over my wife’s fresh grave.”

“Oh no, Your Grace, I assure you, it is nothing of the sort. This matter is regarding the late Lady Burke. The news is she died from

the ‘flu, yes?’”

Nathan’s eyes narrowed.

“She had been ill for some time, yes. The physician diagnosed her with a stubborn ‘flu that would not yield to treatment. It eventually took her life.”

“And did you not find that strange, my lord? That a mere ‘flu would cause such mortal harm?”

“How do you mean? Lady Burke has always been frail in health.”

“I see... I shall deliver my warning anyway. Someone wishes to hurt you and your family again. I am afraid I cannot say who, as I value my life. However, I find that I cannot simply be a bystander and watch your household be destroyed. Someone close to your family, my lord, very close, wishes to cause you harm, to take all that you have and own. I pray thee, do not ignore this warning. You must take heed and be wary of all those

you call friend and family.”

“Nonsense!” Nathan silenced him,
suddenly filled with rage.

Mr. Brighton’s eyes widened, and he took
two steps back.

“Your Grace?”

“Leave! Leave and never return! I shall
hear no more of your nonsense! My wife died
of natural causes, and you have done a great

evil coming here on this day that we have chosen to lay her to rest, to heap coals of fire on our already burning hearts. How dare you! How dare you suggest that she could have died by the hands of someone and, no less, someone close to us!”

“Your Grace! I see that you are upset. Please understand you have misunderstood my meaning. I have not come here today to say that there is someone behind her death. Goodness, no! I have only asked you to be careful and watchful. I did tell you that now

was neither the time nor place, but you asked me to speak anyway.”

“That was only because I did not know you wished to spill such foulness. Mr. Brighton, our sorrows are more than enough as it is. You shall not add to our grief with such preposterous lies. Leave now or I shall have you removed from this property and charge you for trespassing!”

Mr. Brighton looked as if he could not believe the turn of events.

He sunk into another bow.

“As you wish, Your Grace. Please accept my deepest apologies. I did not mean to poke at any fresh wounds. I now realize the error of my ways. I shall leave and never return, but I beg you ... when the pain is no longer as fresh, think of my words, for they are as true as the sun and the moon. I bid you farewell.”

Unwilling to say any more in the heat of anger, Nathan turned away from the man, his

hands clasped behind him.

He listened as Mr. Brighton walked away with hurried steps. Certain that he was now truly alone, Nathaniel drew in a deep breath and exhaled a sigh.

What madness was this? Who was that man? How could he have presumed to know anything of Clara? How could he be so cruel as to speak such atrocious lies at a time like this?

Mr. Brighton had probably hoped for some sort of reward for peddling false news, but if Nathan ever saw him again, his only reward would be a visit from the constable.

He sighed again, as he felt the last wave of his anger roll off his shoulders.

Finally, he found the words to speak to Clara.

“You have only been gone four days, and the whole world is already a muddle. Why?

Why did you have to leave? What am I supposed to do now that you are gone? Why, Clara? Why would you leave me so alone in this dark world?”

Those were questions he would never stop asking, but to which he knew he would never get answers.

Chapter 2

Charlotte Willmington's joy surpassed all others, as she cheered along with the crowd upon the vicar's announcement.

She had never felt prouder than she did in that moment. She watched, mesmerized, as Benjamin lowered his head to kiss his bride, her little sister.

More tears rolled from her eyes at the beautiful scene, and, as the crowd broke into cheers again, she put away the handkerchief

that had been in her hand all day, wiping away every tear of joy.

Finally, she felt free.

Her chest suddenly had enough room to breathe and laugh. The last of her sisters, Mary, had just been given away in marriage.

Her work here was done, and she had done a very good job, even if she said so herself.

By her side, sat her other sisters, Lilly and Ana, with their husbands, Elijah and Thomas. Charlotte had been responsible for them since the day their mother had died ten years ago.

As the eldest, she had been thrown into her mother's big shoes, having no other choice than to fill them with her own small feet. As she grew, Charlotte went from being clueless to being the closest thing to a mother her sisters had.

There had been many long days and several sacrifices along the way, but finally, here they were on this happy day.

Lilly, who was twenty-two, had married four years ago. Ana, twenty, had married two years ago, and now the last of them, Mary, was off her hands aged eighteen.

Charlotte had no husband. Unlike her sisters, she had not suffered such luck. Not that she had ever let it trouble her. Having a husband of her own would have meant a new

family.

She would not have been able to care for her sisters as she had all these years. In all honesty, it was not as though she had not had her own fair share of suitors, but she had refused them all.

So now, here she was, four-and-twenty summers, and, no doubt, doomed to be a spinster.

She had accepted her fate a long time

ago, and she felt no grudge for the hand she had been dealt. Seeing her sisters settled in their new homes, happy and thriving was enough for her.

It was all the happiness and goodness that she needed in her life. At the very least, now she could concentrate on herself, knowing that for the first time in a very long time, she no longer had anyone for whom she was responsible.

She rose to her feet as the happy couple

ended the kiss, joining the crowd as folk swarmed the newlyweds to express their good wishes.

The next hour went by quickly.

Charlotte had to oversee the arrangements for the reception setting, making sure that all was correct and that nothing was amiss.

Finally, as everyone settled down, making small talk, dining, and helping

themselves to the numerous dishes on display, she took some time to satisfy her own hunger pangs.

She was adding a last spoonful of sauce, when someone came up to her side and began to fill their plate, too.

“It was such a beautiful wedding. I hear that is all thanks to you, dear.”

Charlotte dropped the spoon she was holding and turned to see who it was. Her

eyes brightened in recognition, and she immediately sank into a curtsy, holding her plate carefully with one hand as the other lifted her skirt.

“Your Grace!

It was the Dowager Duchess of Wimsley, Lady Ophelia Burke. She was well known and well respected in London society for her wit, humor, and kindness.

Charlotte had never had the chance to

meet lady Burke personally, as they hardly moved in the same social circles, but she admired the woman's reputation greatly.

“Oh, weddings are always so, Your Grace. I did nothing special, save to make certain that all went as planned.”

The duchess smiled at her, her brown eyes glinting with the wisdom of her years.

“You organized it all, just as you did the ceremonies of your other sisters before this

one. I have heard of you, Lady Willmington, and I have been watching you for some time now. You are a woman of many talents.”

“You give me high praise, Your Grace. I only do what I must do.”

“And you do it exceptionally well. So, please, accept the compliments, for they are nothing but the truth. Do not be so modest, now.”

Charlotte’s smile widened, so much so

that her cheeks almost hurt.

“Thank you, Your Grace, you are very kind indeed.”

The duchess nodded, appraising her keenly. “I assume you know who I am?”

Charlotte chuckled at that. “Everyone knows who you are, Your Grace.”

“Ah ... is that so? Tell me then: who might you say I am?”

Charlotte knew when she was being teased, so she smiled harder.

“Lady Burke, Dowager Duchess of Wimsley. You have my admiration and respect.”

The older woman had the grace to blush.
“Oh, and you accuse me of flattery?”

“No, Your Grace. Like you, I only speak the truth.”

“I see. Then, it would appear that we both have high impressions of one another. That is just as well. I would say that we have certainly begun on the right foot, would you not?”

“It would appear so.”

Charlotte had only ever seen herself as a lowly baron's daughter, who had always tried to do the best by her family and fulfill her duties, no matter what that required.

The knowledge that her actions had not gone unnoticed put a new kind of joy in her heart. One that did not have to do with the celebration today. No, it was the kind of joy that came from being recognized and appreciated for her efforts and hard work.

“It is such a delight to finally make your acquaintance, Lady Willmington.” Lady Burke said as she began to walk away from the crowd. Charlotte followed her; all thoughts of food forgotten.

“You see, I have wanted to come to see you for some time now. I have always wondered when the perfect moment would be, but I do not suppose there would be any day more perfect than this. I am aware that your sisters have been in your care since you were fourteen. Is that right?”

Charlotte nodded. “Yes, Your Grace. After my mother died, they became my responsibility.”

“And you have done a commendable job caring for them. In ten years, you have seen them raised to be proper ladies and married honorably to gentlemen of the ton. As a mother myself, I am aware that nothing makes one prouder. I imagine your heart must be filled with joy.”

“Very much so. At first, I did not think I would be able to do it, but I have succeeded, and here we are. I am as proud as I am grateful, for I know it was not by my power alone.”

“A devout Christian, as well? Hmm ...
wonderful.”

Lady Burke came to a stop then, and so
did Charlotte. The older woman turned to face
her.

“Well, I shan't waste any more of your
time. If you know me, then you must know I
have a son. You must also know that he is
widowed, and that his late wife left behind a
child. A very lovely girl, now all of eight

summers.”

“I did hear of the terrible news, Your Grace. I thought it was a sad thing. I too have suffered loss, so I know it is never easy.”

“Ah yes. It was three years ago. With time, the pain gets easier to bear.”

Lady Burke would know about that, as she too had lost her husband only a year before losing her daughter-in-law. It was a tragedy indeed. It had torn Charlotte’s heart

when she had heard the news.

She nodded, and the dowager continued, “For these three years, Eva, my granddaughter, has lived with me at the Wimsley estate, away from the manor where her father’s seat is. I have only recently decided that it is time to return her to her father, so that they can live as a family once again. She misses him terribly, and her absence was only meant to be for a short while. Until ... until he felt capable of raising her with love and care, not pain and sorrow.”

Charlotte nodded again, understanding, even as her heart broke for the family yet again.

“I understand that as all your sisters are now married; you can live for yourself. You are reputable, Lady Willmington. I suppose you must have surmised where I am leading with all this. I would like to offer you a post as Eva’s governess. Eva, you see ... she can be difficult, and, in the past three years, she has frustrated everyone else that we have hired.

Her father, on the other hand, is not ready to take up her education; nor does he have the time. With all that I have learned of you, I believe without a doubt in my heart that you are beyond perfect for this position. I believe that you are just what Eva needs.”

Lady Burke paused then to gaze into the depth of Charlotte’s eyes, a desperate plea in hers.

“We would meet any demands you wish to make. All that we ask is that you grant us

this request and take on this seemingly difficult task. Will you, Lady Willmington?”

Charlotte was in awe. This woman had spoken to her as though she truly believed in her. How could she refuse?

Beyond that, after accepting that she was fated to be a spinster for life, Charlotte had known that the only path to take now was to become a governess and tutor young girls for as long as she lived.

She had decided to start applying at households after Mary's wedding was done with; yet here she was, being handed a golden opportunity on a silver platter.

“I would be honored, Your Grace.”

Charlotte saw the happiness kindle in those wise, brown eyes before Lady Burke's lips curved into a grin.

“I hoped you would say that.”

She realized then that, like Lady Burke, she had no reservations, no second thoughts. Despite being told of the difficulty that little Eva presented, she was absolutely certain that she wanted to take up the role of the girl's governess with every gladness in her heart.

Chapter 3

Charlotte was at home, enjoying her tea.

It had been so quiet since Mary had left over a week ago, taking the last of her things with her.

It had taken a while to get used to it, but now the silence provided good company.

No one to call to breakfast or caution to stop running down the stairs. No one to tell to hold the needle correctly or to pay attention to their lessons.

As she finished her tea, she decided to go out to the gardens and enjoy the sunshine.

Her home was not by any means extravagant. It was small, cozy with all of five rooms, but it was home. She had carved the garden out herself, for she loved flowers very much.

She had just stepped out of the drawing room when she heard a knock on the door. She stopped in her tracks and spun around.

Who could it be?

True, Lady Burke had promised to call one of these days, but she had not said when, and it had been days since the wedding. Charlotte did not think it would be her.

Mr. Joseph, the butler, came into view, bowing slightly. She nodded at him and waited as he went to the door.

She listened as Mr. Joseph spoke with whomever it was at the door, but she could

make nothing out of the words. After a moment, the butler stepped out of the way to reveal Lady Burke.

“Your Grace!” Charlotte chimed. “Oh my! This is such a lovely surprise! I was not expecting you today.”

Lady Burke was radiant as always, and by her side was a little girl Charlotte instantly surmised to be Eva. Together, they walked toward her, smiling.

As they reached her side, Charlotte took time to observe the little girl. She was a beauty, and her eyes, goodness ... they were so lovely. The purest of hazel Charlotte had ever seen.

“Do not be so shocked. I told you I would call one of these days. We did not get time to fully discuss matters at the wedding. I am sorry it took so long. There were some matters that needed attending to.”

There was a pause as Lady Burke gently

pushed the little girl by her side forward.

“Lady Willmington, meet my
granddaughter, Eva. Eva, say hello to Lady
Willmington.”

Charlotte’s eyes fell to the girl, smiling as
Eva hurriedly curtsied.

“Hello, Lady Willmington.”

“Hello, Eva. It is lovely to finally meet
you.” Charlotte turned to Lady Burke. “Please,

follow me into the drawing room.”

They followed her in silence as she led the way. Soon, they came to the drawing room, and she ushered them in.

“Do find yourselves some comfort.”

Before she could call for tea, Mildred, one of the staff, joined them.

“My lady?”

“Bring us tea, please, would you?”

Mildred nodded, dipped into a curtsy, and took her leave. As she did, Charlotte settled into her own chair.

“Our tea will be here shortly.”

“Of course. Thank you, Lady Willmington
—”

“Please, you may call me Charlotte. It is what everyone else does.”

Mildred soon returned, and as she began to pour the tea, Charlotte stopped her with her hand.

“Do not worry yourself, Mildred. I shall take see to it.”

With another curtsy, the maid took her leave and Charlotte took over. There was silence as she poured. Lady Burke broke it.

“Charlotte, it is such a lovely name.”

There was a pause as she accepted the cup from Charlotte's hands. "Thank you, dear."

Charlotte nodded, turning to Eva with another cup which the little girl accepted gracefully.

She poured a cup for herself as well and took a sip.

"This tastes lovely, Charlotte," Lady Burke commented.

“I am glad it is to your liking, Your Grace. Once again, welcome to my humble abode.”

“You have such a lovely home. Thank you for inviting us in. I must apologize. I came without any notice. I hope you forgive me, and I do hope I am not intruding on something important?”

“Not at all. I was just going to go out to the garden to take in some sun.”

“Ah ... I see. Sounds lovely. Perhaps, when we are done with our tea, you shall show us this garden of yours?”

“I would be happy to.”

Charlotte's heart was filled with warmth, and it had nothing to do with the tea she was sipping. She was simply happy.

Lady Burke was in her home! And the girl, she could not stop staring at her, curiosity filling her eyes. She did not even care to hide

it. Four times now, Charlotte had caught her.

Smiling, Charlotte put her cup down and spoke to the child.

“Do you like gardens, Miss Eva?”

Her reply came swiftly, her bright eyes holding Charlotte's, undaunted.

“Very much. I would play in them all day if only Grandmother would let me.”

From the side of her eye, Charlotte could see Lady Burke shake her head slowly. She simply smiled.

“Well, you can certainly play in mine today!”

The little girl’s eyes shone in excitement, but she tried to quell it. This amused Charlotte.

“That would be lovely,” she replied as she put her cup away. “Grandmother says you

are to be my new governess?”

“Yes, indeed, if all goes well.”

“You are pretty, especially your hair.

None of the governesses before you have been this pretty ... or so young.”

Charlotte sneaked in a glance at Lady Burke, who seemed quite content to sip on her tea, a knowing smile on her face.

It would appear that the little lassie had

inherited some of her grandmother's candor.

Charlotte wondered what other traits were there and which she had taken from her parents.

Eva was a tall child, so she supposed that was from her father. Her hair was short and black, that too from her father.

But as for the hazel eyes and small lips, she could not say. She had never met the duke and had only seen him from afar, and she had not known the late duchess at all.

“I am sure I hear a compliment in there somewhere, Eva. Thank you.”

“Why did Grandmother choose you? I thought only old ladies could be governesses?”

“Well, many governesses are indeed older than I am, but I am not so young either, Eva.

“How old are you?”

“Four-and-twenty summers. How old are

you?”

“Eight summers. Gracious ... you really are not that young!”

“You see, I told you.”

“So, what made Grandmother think that I would like you? I have never liked any of my governesses. They have never been able to stay long, either. I heard Father telling Grandmother that I chase them all away.”

One would think the child would show a little remorse, but all Charlotte could hear and see was pride and a smirk of mischief. It was clear to her now that, indeed, Eva was a handful.

Yet, something told her she was yet to get a glimpse of the real little girl.

“Oh well, Eva, I cannot speak for your other governesses, as I do not know them. What I can assure you is that I am willing to do my job well and that I will not leave you.”

“Even if I chase you away?”

Charlotte shook her head, her heart breaking at the little hint of hope in the little girl's voice.

“I don't think you shall be able to manage such a feat. I have three younger sisters who were quite a handful, and they never managed to make me leave.”

There was a flicker in those hazel eyes ...

something that broke Charlotte's heart in a way she could not explain. It was gone as soon as she saw it, replaced by a resolute, mischievous twinkle.

“I suppose we shall see.”

“I suppose we shall.”

Eva said nothing more, and silence reigned as they finished their tea.

When they were done, Charlotte led them

both to the garden. The field was a small one, but Eva was happy to explore while Charlotte and Lady Burke stayed behind, keeping an eye on her.

“I know I did not tell you I would be bringing my granddaughter along, but I thought it would be fair to give you a glimpse of what you will be taking on.”

Charlotte looked at the little girl chasing a butterfly, her face emboldened with joy.

In a way, she understood Eva and shared her pain. She herself had lost her mother when she was fourteen, and her entire world had been torn apart.

Eva had been only five. The woman whom she had loved most in the world had left before she had been able to gain any true knowledge of her. It could not have been easy.

Now that Charlotte thought of it ... that hope, that flicker she'd glimpsed in the young girl's eyes ... perhaps Eva was simply weary of

letting anyone else in, afraid that they would leave, too. And when they did, they simply confirmed her fears.

Not to mention that it seemed as though her father appeared to have cared little for her since the tragedy, allowing his own pain to blind him to his daughter's. Of course, she could not be certain, and far be it from her to make any judgment on the duke's person, but she knew what grief could do to people.

She had seen what it did to her father

and how much it had affected her sisters and herself.

Perhaps Eva was simply proving to be difficult because she had pain of her own that she did not understand and did not know how to manage.

How could anyone leave a child alone like this?

“She is a handful. That much I will admit. However, she also has a bright mind.

Her quick wit and candor have endeared her to me already. I would like to accept the post, Your Grace, if that is what you are asking.”

“Sometimes she can be petulant.” Lady Burke’s eyes rested lovingly on the child, her voice soft. It was easy to see that the duchess adored her granddaughter.

“As all children can be. Mary was her age when our mother died. I have had my fair share of experience when it comes to dealing with eight-year-olds.”

“I am aware that you made a promise in there, but do not feel bound by it. You can leave at any time you wish.”

“That will only happen when you say that you no longer require my services. I am not one to abandon tasks unfinished, my lady, much less people.”

“Your mind is made up then?”

“Yes, it is.”

Lady Burke heaved a meaningful sigh. “I see. I should very much like you to move into the manor with us. Wimshor, where the seat is, is such a long distance from London. You would not be able to make the journey to and fro daily. Would that be acceptable?”

“My sisters are gone, and I no longer have any commitments here. I see no reason why I cannot move to the manor.”

“Your remuneration will be handsome, I

assure you. Whatever you demand shall be met. Your chamber will be decorated to your taste, and you shall have the servants at your disposal.”

“Thank you very much, Your Grace, you are most kind.”

“I have spoken to Nathan about it, and he is expecting us. When do you think you will be able to start?”

“In a week? I shall need to tie up some

loose ends here before I leave.”

“Take all the time you need. I shall have a carriage sent to bring you when you are ready. You need only write to me.”

“I shall.”

“It is settled, then. Thank you so much, Charlotte. You have no inkling how much you have done for us by agreeing to this.”

Charlotte smiled, overwhelmed by the

duchess's evident relief.

“You honor me with this opportunity. I assure you that the pleasure is all mine.”

Just then, a squeal erupted, drawing their attention to the child in the field.

“Look, Lady Willmington! I caught the butterfly.”

Warmed by this, Charlotte turned to her with a grin.

“Is that so? Come here and let me have a look. You have done very well, Eva. Be careful not to hold it so tightly, lest you crush it.”

Eva broke into a run, and Charlotte found herself cautioning her yet again.

“Careful, Eva, you should not be running... There are little stones all over, and you could trip.”

Eva slowed in her tracks, and, just as Charlotte thought she had been successful, she

spotted a small smirk. The little girl picked up her pace again, running faster than she had before, and, in no time, she was standing in front of the adults.

Charlotte turned to Lady Burke, who simply shrugged. The smile she was trying to hold back was evident.

“Eva ... I asked you not to run.”

“No, you said to be careful lest I trip, and I was. I did not trip. Now, look at it. It is

beautiful, is it not?

Charlotte looked at her tiny hands to find a colorful butterfly resting peacefully.

“It is beautiful. What are you going to do with it?”

“I am going to let it go. It deserves to be free so it can fly.”

At those words, she threw her hands into the air and watched as the butterfly fluttered

away.

“You have done well, Eva. You have a kind heart.”

“Thank you, Lady Willmington!”

With that, she was off again. Shaking her head, Charlotte turned to look at the older woman who was now chuckling freely.

“What is it?”

“Oh ... it is just something I have not seen in a long time. Eva, so taken with anyone other than me.”

“Really?”

“Really. She likes you, Charlotte, and I am excited to see what lies ahead.”

This knowledge pleased Charlotte greatly, for little Miss Burke had woven herself around Charlotte’s heart, too.

And it was only their first meeting.

Chapter 4

Nathaniel stood outside the grand edifice which he called home, his hands clasped behind his back, his chin raised, as he awaited the arrival of his mother and daughter.

Three years. That's how long it had been since his daughter last set foot in the manor here in Wimshor. Every time he had seen her in those past years, it had been at the estate in Wimsley.

As to be expected, they had become

rather estranged. It was something that could not have been helped. Her mother's death had left him thoroughly devastated and incapable of raising her himself.

He had never allowed her to visit for fear that she would not want to return. His daughter had a mind of her own, and she was growing to become a strong, fierce young woman.

Just like her mother.

He had visited the estate no more than five times, and, each time, he had not stayed beyond two nights, making it impossible to repair or rebuild any bond that still remained between them.

He knew this was terrible of him. He knew anyone would say that he was a cold man who did not love his daughter, but that was far from the truth.

He loved her too much. Just as he had loved her mother—still loved her. That is why

it was so hard to be around Eva.

Today, that ceased. His mother had put her foot down a month ago, informing him that she had finally made the decision to return to Wimshor with Eva, for good this time, and that he would not convince her otherwise.

Nathan had been helpless to refuse, knowing that his mother had indeed been patient with him, and that time was past due for them to live as a family again.

After all, the arrangement was never meant to have lasted this long. This was necessary.

His chest grew tight as the gates opened in the distance, and a familiar carriage rolled in. She was here, finally.

His palms were now damp, and he had half a mind to turn around and go to hide in his study.

No. No more hiding. He would face this ordeal, and he would finally do right by Eva and be a responsible father.

Where would he begin? How would he start being a father to her all over again? The whole situation was already proving to be even harder than he had imagined.

Finally, the carriage rolled to a stop, and the footman rushed to help the ladies down.

His breath ceased when he saw her.

Six months ago. That was the last time he had set his sight upon her. Goodness! She had grown even bigger in that time and was looking more beautiful than ever.

And still so much like her mother.

Just how much of her growth had he missed?

“Nathan! Don’t just stand there! Come and embrace your mother immediately!”

His mother's voice pulled him out of his thoughts. His lips stretched into a smile as he looked up at her. In long strides, he ascended the stairs and soon reached them.

“Mother!” he said warmly, taking her into his arms and kissing her cheeks. Stepping backwards, he continued, “It is so good to see you.”

“We met only a week ago, Nathan. I am not the one you should be happy to see.” His

mother jerked her head in Eva's direction,
and, once again, Nathan turned to his child.

“Welcome home, Eva. It is good to finally
have you back.”

He did not know what to say or do. Was
this the point where he opened his arms and
hoped that she would come into them? Or
were his hands to remain by his side?

Eva stared at him with wide eyes, yet he
could not read the emotions in them. As he

waited, his heart began beating fast.

Eventually, Eva moved but not towards him. Side-stepping her father, she broke into a run and made for the house.

Nathan turned around, watching her go, face fallen, heart sunk and broken in two. How could he fault her? What else had he been expecting?

All of this was of his doing.

“Give her a little time. She will come around, you will see. She is simply hurt, that is all.”

Sighing, he faced his mother. “I do not know how to make things right.”

“You must proceed one day at a time. Be patient with her. This situation was three years in the making. It will not be undone overnight. You must simply shower love upon her and see if she does not grow soft. She has become accustomed to getting by without you,

but we both know she has missed and needed her father terribly. All will be well in good time.”

Nathaniel nodded, understanding his mother.

“Well, things are certainly going to change around here,” Nathaniel said.

“That they are. Having a child in any home makes everything a lot more thrilling...” his mother replied, smiling fondly.

“Challenging, you mean. She is a handful!” he pointed out nervously.

“And how would you know that?”

His face fell again at his mother’s accusatory tone. He said nothing for a moment, then cleared his throat.

“You said that you have found her a governess?”

They started to walk towards the house.

“Yes. She starts in four days. I shall have the maids prepare a chamber for her close to Eva’s.”

“But that would be in our wing.”

“Would you rather have your daughter at opposite ends from you? Charlotte is a proper lady; you need not worry. No one would raise their brows at the arrangement.”

“I was not worried about that, Mother.”

From the corner of his eye, he could see her smirk.

“Indeed.”

“Charlotte, you say her name is?”

“Lady Charlotte Willmington. She is the first of Lord Willmington’s four daughters. The Baron of Maybrook?”

They stopped as they reached the doors.

“The title rings a bell, but I am not certain that I have made personal acquaintance with the baron.”

“Hmmm. I thought not. At any rate, Charlotte will be good for Eva, you shall see.”

“You said that about the others, Mother.”

She smiled then. “Well, I was hopeful. This time, I am sure. They already get along so

well! Charlotte is different, I tell you. Now, if you will excuse me, I must see to a certain hurt eight-year-old.”

With those words, his mother stepped in through the doors, leaving him alone with his thoughts once again.

As he found his way to his study, he could not help wondering if it would not be wise to go to Eva as well, but he decided against it.

As for the governess ... he supposed he should be grateful that he would have help with the child, yet he was wary.

When his mother had told him that she had found a new governess a week ago, he had refused to get his hopes up, aware of how little luck they had experienced so far.

None had ever stayed beyond four months, and each shorter than the last. The last one had left at the end of her third week.

Three weeks was all it had taken for Eva to frustrate her. He sincerely hoped his mother was right this time, and that Lady Willmington would not have come all the way here for nothing.

Just as his mother had assured him she would, Lady Willmington arrived four days later, on a Sunday afternoon.

They all stood outside waiting to receive

her, and as soon as she dropped from the carriage, Eva broke into a run.

“Lady Willmington! You are here!”

Nathan did not know which shocked him more—his daughter’s obvious joy or the exuberance with which she threw herself into this Lady Willmington’s arms.

He stood watching, his mouth slightly ajar, eyes wide and brows furrowed as the lady caught his daughter, hoisted her up and

broke into loud giggles.

Beside him, his mother cleared her throat, and he turned to see her smiling knowingly.

“I told you they already get along so well.”

“They have only had one meeting.”

Lady Burke lifted her shoulders in a soft shrug. “It was quite a memorable one.”

She began to walk towards Eva and Lady Willmington, but Nathan remained where he was, still in awe.

As the shock faded, he easily recognized the gnawing feeling inside of him.

It was jealousy.

The welcome Lady Willmington had received from his daughter was that which he had secretly hoped for himself four days ago,

when Eva had arrived.

That had not happened. Instead, in the past four days, he had barely been able to get more than two sentences from her at a time. He was not even certain that she had even smiled at him once.

Yet, there she was, unable to stop giggling in the arms of Lady Willmington.

Also ... why did this lady look so young? Nathan had assumed she would be a spinster,

probably elderly, like the other governesses before her.

As they drew closer to him, his frown deepened.

Lady Willmington was not only young, she was also beautiful. Strikingly so.

Finally, the pair came to stand in front of him and he saw her—truly saw her. He lost his breath.

By God, she was lovely!

Her hair, so silky and beautiful, reminded him of strawberries. It fell in ripping waves all the way down to her waist.

Her eyes were blue. The blue of the sea. The kind that called to sailors and tempted them to jump in the water, even if they would drown.

She was slender, but not in a way that suggested frailty, merely a graceful femininity.

Her head stopped just below his chin, and her face was perfectly sculpted.

Oval. Her skin was radiant, and he instantly knew that she was the kind of woman who turned heads at the balls.

Why had she decided to become a governess? He decided he would ask his mother more about her. He was genuinely intrigued.

He was aware that Lady Willmington was

taking him in as he appraised her in silence. Eventually, his mother decided to break the silence by introducing them.

“Nathan, Lady Charlotte Wilmington. Charlotte, meet my son, Duke of Wimsley and Eva’s father, Lord Nathaniel Burke.”

“My lady,” he greeted, bowing as he took her hand. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

She dipped into a curtsy, rising

gracefully. “And I you, Your Grace. You have a beautiful home.”

Nathaniel looked around as if suddenly seeing his home for the first time.

“Thank you. I hope you will like it here.”

“I hope so, too.”

A charming smile lingered on her face, and he found himself smiling, as well.

“Welcome. I assume the journey was long and tiring. Before I leave you to settle into your chambers and take your rest, might I suggest we have some tea? As you can imagine, there is much to discuss. If you do not mind, of course.”

“Not at all. I would be happy to have tea.”

He turned to lead the way.

She truly seemed lovely, gentle, and

kind. Her smile carried warmth. One that he found unexpectedly endearing. She also appeared to be well educated and sensible.

He supposed he would need more time to fully decide on the truth of that. Nevertheless, in some measure, he understood why Eva had taken an instant liking to her new governess.

A moment later, they were in his study, teacups in their hands, his mother and daughter nowhere in sight.

“I hope you are comfortable, Lady
Wilmington,” he began.

“Very much so. Thank you for opening
your home to me.”

“It is the least we could do. After all, we
are putting our daughter in your care.”

“A trust that I do not take for granted.”

“That is pleasing to hear...” There was a
pause as he took a sip of tea, holding her gaze

over the rim of his cup.

“Mother says that she has discussed matters with you at length?”

“Yes.”

“So, I assume you are aware of what your duties are to be?”

She nodded again, “Very much so.”

“Splendid... Have you ever been a

governess before, Lady Willmington? Pardon my curiosity, it is only that ... you seem so young.”

“I am young. Twenty and four summers, and to answer your question, no, Your Grace, I have never done this before.”

Twenty and four summers and so beautiful. Nathan was aware of how society worked, so why was a lady such as lady Willmington not married by now?

And to decide to become a governess?

That was agreeing to a life of spinsterhood.

What could be the lady's story?

“Yet you seem quite at home with this arrangement.”

“I have three sisters. All of whom I raised after we lost our mother. You could say that I have had some practice.”

“A-ha. Now I see. I am sorry to hear about your mother. I, too, know what loss

feels like.” He still mourned his dear Clara.

“You are certain you can manage Eva? I do not know if you have been told or noticed; she is quite the challenge.”

She smiled again, and he felt something shift inside of him. He did not like it one bit.

“Eva is just what she is, a child. Yes, Lady Burke did advise me, and I might have caught a few glimpses myself. But I am certain it is nothing that cannot be managed, with

care.”

“There have been several governesses before you. The last stayed only three weeks before quitting.”

That had been meant to ruffle her, but she answered swiftly.

“I am certain that they had their reasons. I intend to stay until you no longer require my services.”

“Hmmm ... you seem very confident,
Lady Willmington. You sound certain that you
have the situation under control.”

“I would like to believe so, yes.”

“I must admit that I find that very
admirable.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Nathan was silent for a moment. None of
the other governesses had had this kind of

conviction, and they had never met Eva before being employed.

His mother was right. Lady Willmington was indeed different. In every way.

Swallowing, he broke the silence once again.

“Eva ... she lost her mother at a tender age. I know that has taken its toll on her. She is ... special.”

“Believe me, I am aware. Your child is smart as a whip, and I have seen that she can

also be a happy girl. I am confident that we shall continue to get along very well. You need not worry.”

Nathaniel was pleased by her resoluteness, yet he could not help but fear that her opinion would soon change as the days unfolded and she got to learn more of Eva.

The least he could do was to have a little faith and hope that, this time, all would go well.

“If her joy at seeing you again is anything to go by, I am inclined to agree with you, my lady. You just might continue to get along very nicely.”

Perhaps Lady Willmington might just be the answer to their prayers, after all.

Chapter 5

Charlotte stretched and yawned as she awoke the next morning. She could feel the strength in her bones and knew that she was well rested.

Her chamber was beautiful and well suited to her taste. She had decided not to have any expectations, but the moment she had stepped into this room, she had been impressed.

It was fit for a princess, and that was no

overstatement. Along with the things she had brought with her, she had all that she could ever need.

The rest of the day before had gone on uneventfully after the conversation with Lord Burke. After she had left his study, she had been shown to her chamber, where a hot bath had been waiting for her.

Afterwards, she had been invited to a late lunch. As lunch ended, Lady Burke announced that the evening was hers to do with as she

deemed fit.

So, Charlotte had returned to her room, unpacked her belongings, and arranged them carefully in their rightful places. Then, she had taken a tour around the manor, Eva being her guide and companion.

The little girl had only been back four days, but she had managed to quickly familiarize herself with the surroundings once again.

The tour had been delightful and the walk in the gardens peaceful. When they had been called to dinner, they had been sad to see their walk come to an end.

Dinner had been hearty and quiet. When it was over, Eva begged Charlotte to put her to bed, which she did. Finally, Charlotte retired to her room.

Sleep had come almost as soon as her head touched the soft pillows.

It was a new day, and Charlotte had a very good feeling about it. In addition to the fact that this place already felt like home after one night, she was filled with a sense of immense positivity.

She rose from her bed, eager to begin the day. As she washed and dressed, she replayed the conversation she had had with Lord Burke the day before in her head.

Truly, she had not been pleased with how hard he had tried to discourage her and

make her doubt herself. She knew he had probably done it with honest intentions. Nevertheless, it had made her unhappy.

Eva was a wonderful child, no matter what her father said. Charlotte knew this and felt it in her heart, and she was going to prove that she was capable and here to stay for as long as they wanted her to.

Just as she finished dressing, a knock rapped against the door.

“My lady?”

“Who is it?” she called out.

“It is I, Cecilia. His Grace wishes that you join them in the drawing room for tea.”

Tea?

“Thank you, Cecilia. I’m almost done getting ready for the day. I shall be down shortly.”

“Yes, my lady.”

Charlotte listened as the footfalls grew fainter. Then she turned to look at herself in the mirror.

She was one for simple clothing, and she had chosen a plain, cream-colored dress for the day. It would serve her well.

She considered putting her hair up as the prim and proper governesses always did but decided against it. She wasn't like other

governesses, and she liked her hair flowing free.

It was one of those few things she still had left of her mother.

Satisfied with her appearance, she smiled and proceeded to leave her chamber.

She found the drawing room, eventually, after getting lost twice. It was such a big house, and despite the tour yesterday, she supposed she would need some time to learn

her way around.

She heard the silence as soon as she stepped into the room. It was so loud that it was almost deafening.

Father and child sat quietly, opposite each other, looking everywhere else but at one another. The moment they felt her presence, both pairs of eyes turned to her.

“Lady Willmington!” Eva chimed, but this time, she did not come to her. The little

girl remained in her seat.

Not that Charlotte minded. The smile that had lightened up her face was enough to brighten Charlotte's entire day.

"Hello, Eva!" she replied, with a smile.

"You look very pretty this morning. I trust you slept well?"

"Like a baby," came Eva's reply.

"That is wonderful. Any dreams?"

Charlotte kept her eyes on Eva as she walked further into the room toward the chairs. The little girl seemed to be thinking of an answer to the question. Finally, she spoke.

“None that I can remember. You?”

“I had a dreamless sleep, too.”

“What is a dreamless sleep?”

Charlotte smiled at the girl and turned to

look at her father.

“A dreamless sleep is one where you do not have any dreams, my dear. Your Grace,” she greeted him before Eva could ask another question.

“Lady Willmington. Kind of you to join us. You look well rested. Please, do sit down.”

Charlotte sat. “I feel well rested. Thank you for the invitation. I hope I have not kept you waiting.”

“Not at all. We have not been here long. I assumed you would be tired after the day you had traveling yesterday and requested that no one disturb you. As it happened, Eva wanted you here with us. It is I who should be apologizing if I interrupted your sleep.”

His genuine care made her cheeks warm. She had caught a glimpse of it the day before but had been too distracted by his words of caution to fully take notice.

Oh, but she had taken notice of the fact that the duke was indeed a handsome man.

“There is no need. What kind of governess would I be if I slept in on my first day? I was already up and about when Cecilia arrived.”

“I am pleased to know that.”

Her response was a small smile as she waited for the maid to pour her tea. She graciously accepted her cup and took a sip,

savoring its rich taste and the silky warmth
that flowed down her throat.

“This is good tea.”

His lips curved into a smirk. “It is from
the plantation. Fresh as the new day.”

“And properly brewed,” she added.

“I am glad it is to your liking.”

Silence remained, while they continued

to sip. Charlotte asked for two more pours, for she could not seem to get enough of its rich taste. After the third, she put down the cup.

It would not do to finish all the tea on her first day.

Turning to the little girl by her side, she asked, “Are you ready for your lessons, Eva?”

The response was a wide-toothed grin and a resounding, “Yes.”

An hour later, they were settled in the solar that Lord Burke had announced they would be using for their lessons.

Lady Burke had given her free rein to arrange the lessons as she saw fit, and Charlotte had decided to begin with grammar.

“Grammar,” Eva read as Charlotte finished writing the word on the board.

She turned around to face the girl,
pleased that she could read so well.

“Yes, Eva. Today, we shall take lessons
on grammar. Do you know what that is?”

“The subject in which I’m taught to
speak, read, and write properly?”

Charlotte was impressed. “Precisely.
Have you had any lessons on grammar
before?”

Eva shrugged. “A few. Miss Lockwood was the first to teach me, but I never really enjoyed her lessons ... or any of the others after her.”

“I see... Well, I am sure that you will enjoy these lessons. Good?”

Eva nodded, and Charlotte turned around to keep writing on the board.

She was pleased that she would not have to start from scratch, and since Eva’s was such

an intelligent mind, she was bound to learn easily.

“Lady Willmington?”

“Yes, Eva?”

“Why do people die?”

Charlotte froze, her mind going blank for a second. Slowly, she recovered and turned to face Eva again.

“What did you say?” She had to be certain she had heard right.

“I asked why people die?”

She had heard aright. Charlotte’s mind began to spin. She was not prepared for such questions.

Of course, she knew where the question had originated, but she simply assumed that the child already had answers. How could she herself answer a question so sensitive as that?

Not to mention, Charlotte did not know whether the child had discussed the subject with her father and grandmother. She did not know what response they had given if she had.

She would hate to say anything contrary.

“Well, Eva, you see ... that is just the way life is. We all come to this earth when we are born, and someday, we must all leave.”

“So, why did Mother leave so soon?”

Grandfather was old when he left. Why did Mother not wait until she grew old?”

Charlotte cleared her throat, becoming increasingly uncomfortable. She drew nearer to the child and bent down, so that they were at eye level.

She took Eva’s hands into hers, staring softly into her eyes.

“Eva dear, have you tried asking your Father and Grandmother these questions?

They would have better answers for you.”

“But you are my teacher. You ought to have all the answers.”

Charlotte’s lips curved at that, even as she ached for the child.

“Well, perhaps that is true ... however—”

“Please? Father would not tell me. I have tried asking, but he never gives me any answers. He barely speaks to me.”

Charlotte's heart broke into two clean halves. She could feel the pain in the child's voice. She was clearly hurt by her father's neglect.

How could such a nice man like Lord Burke treat his daughter this way? How could anyone neglect this angel?

“You have to tell me. You are my teacher.”

“Oh, Eva. Alright, let me see if I can answer your questions. You see, my dear ... sometimes, God sends his angels to earth to keep watch over some of us. To love us and care for us.”

Eva's eyes grew wide. “Like a guardian angel?”

“Precisely. Like a guardian angel. However, the thing is ... guardian angels are not meant to stay for too long. At some point, God starts to miss them, so he calls them back

home. Your mother was an angel, and God loved her so much, he wanted her back in heaven with him. That is why she had to leave so soon.”

“You mean that?”

Eva’s eyes were swimming with tears, and Charlotte found herself fighting some of her own.

“Cross my heart. Would you like to know something more? Guardian angels never truly

leave. Not entirely. They are always here with us. Watching us, loving us, keeping us away from harm. It's just that, this time, we cannot see them, but we can feel them, sense them."

"We can?"

"Yes, little one. Right here." She took Eva's tiny hands to the left side of her chest.

"In our hearts and in our memories."

Eva looked down at where her hand lay, evidently in awe. When she looked up, a tear

had broken free.

Charlotte itched to wipe it away, to take the child into her arms and rock her comfortingly, but she exercised restraint.

“Lady Willmington?”

“Yes?”

Eva’s lips spread into a grin. “I think I can feel her.”

A chuckle broke free from Charlotte's lips, and she had the overwhelming urge to laugh out loud.

“You see, I told you.”

Suffice it to say, no lesson was held for the rest of the day. Eva kept asking questions, and Charlotte continued to answer to the best of her ability.

If anything, Charlotte was grateful for this moment of bonding. It was so evident that

Eva greatly needed someone with listening ears. She was more than happy to offer hers.

By the time their study hours came to an end, she felt closer to Eva than she had that morning.

This further convinced her that she was fit for the task ahead, and that the situation could only get better.

Chapter 6

After study hours ended, they had lunch.

Eva took a nap, and Charlotte was content to watch her sleep, filling her time with a novel that was one of the classics.

Although, in all honesty, she could barely concentrate. Every now and then, she found herself looking up at the child who slept so peacefully, as though she had no care in the world.

Charlotte knew better.

It was just as she had thought. Today had confirmed it. Eva was hurting.

From their conversations that morning, she had gathered that Eva had barely spent time with her father since her mother's death. Lord Burke had left the child with her grandmother when she had needed him the most.

Why did men often do that? Why did they become so overcome with their grief that

they failed to realize the suffering of their children?

Charlotte was aware that Eva's situation affected her so deeply because it was the story of her life, as well.

After their mother had died, their father ... he had simply ceased to care. He had withdrawn into himself, wallowing, falling deeper, day by day, into that dark void created by the loss of the woman he loved.

Charlotte had had to do manage it all alone. She had not simply been a mother to her sisters; she had been a father, as well. And all the while, she had needed guidance herself, someone who would comfort her, she had needed her own father.

The relationship between them remained broken—not that he had ever attempted to fix it—and every time she had attempted it, she had been met with coldness.

She had given up altogether eventually.

It was six years since she had last tried. They treated one another as strangers who merely bore the same name.

It was a sad reality, and she did not want the same for Eva. The girl was just eight and an only child. There was time yet to mend the rift between her and her father.

Charlotte did not know how to go about it, but what had to be done was suddenly clear to her. She was not there to only be Eva's governess.

She would be her friend, and she would make sure that she did everything in her power to see the daughter and father reconciled and happy with each other once again.

For Eva.

Lord Burke might have seemed distant and even appeared to be unkind, but she refused to believe he was.

She had looked into his eyes, those eyes that were so green that they made her think of the woods in spring, and she had seen gentleness there.

Yes, he still wore his grief like a cloak. He was still in pain, just as much as his daughter was. But Charlotte was sure that he simply needed a small push to realize that he did not have to bear the pain alone; that together, he and Eva could help each other heal. She determined that she would do her best to show him that.

She hoped he would listen and act accordingly.

He struck her as a reasonable man, and although his behavior spoke otherwise, she knew that he loved his daughter and cared for her, truly.

With these thoughts in mind, Charlotte began to hatch a plan.

That evening, Charlotte was invited to join the family for dinner once again. At Eva's request, of course.

She picked a dark blue evening dress that complemented her eyes. She also had her hair done up in a knot. It seemed only proper for the dining table.

By the time she arrived at the dining hall, everyone was already present. She joined them, murmuring her apologies.

Lady Burke and Eva greeted her with warm smiles, and Lord Burke simply nodded in acknowledgement.

There was another man at the table.

He rose as she reached the table, and she racked her brain, trying to remember if there was any other family member she had heard of.

As though Lord Burke had heard her

thoughts, he spoke as she stood in front of her chair.

“Peter, you must meet Lady Willmington, Eva’s new governess. She only arrived yesterday. Lady Willmington, meet my dearest friend, the Earl of Ensworth, Lord Peter Kinsley. He is family.”

Charlotte did not think she had ever seen him before; neither did his name ring any bells.

She gave him her hand as he reached for it.

“I did not realize governesses now look so young and beautiful. I must confess that I rather like this change.”

Charlotte had the grace to smile. She bowed her head, not having room to curtsy.

“I suppose I am among the first of my kind. I do hope others will join in no time. I am honored to make your acquaintance, Lord

Kinsley.”

“Oh, Lady Willmington, I assure you, the honor is mine.”

Lord Kinsley was a charming man, that was clear, but Charlotte was not susceptible to any of his charms. So, she simply maintained her polite smile as she sank into her chair.

“He visits often, so you shall be seeing plenty of him,” Nathan announced.

She nodded, wondering if she had misheard the grumble in his voice. She dared to steal a glance at him and saw that his face was set in a frown.

Well, she had come to notice that Lord Burke was not a man who smiled often. Still, she could not help but wonder if her presence at the table was the cause of his foul mood.

Deciding not to worry herself with it, she started to dish her food. A small hand dropped a spoon of salad into her plate, and she turned

to see Eva smiling cheekily up at her.

Unable to resist the urge, Charlotte reached out and ruffled her hair, causing the child to erupt into giggles.

Everyone in the dining hall turned to them, and Charlotte suddenly felt uncomfortable.

Clearing her throat, she whispered to Eva. “That is very good, Eva. Now, you must maintain silence while you eat.”

The little girl stopped giggling instantly and whispered in return. “Yes, Lady Willmington.”

Just like that, she went back to eating.

Charlotte turned to see that they were still the objects of attention, and she wondered why. They all looked surprised. Was it because Eva had obeyed so easily?

Shrugging, she started to eat, determined

not to be worried by their stares.

Eventually, she stopped feeling their eyes upon her.

Dinner went on quietly after that. It was almost uneventful, save for the occasional glances Lord Kinsley stole her way.

Once or twice, Charlotte caught him looking at her, and he responded with a sheepish grin. She had been at the receiving end of the interest of too many men to not

know what this meant.

Lord Kinsley had taken a liking to her.

Well, it was quite unfortunate that he was not her kind of man.

He was tall, yes. With eyes blue like frost.

His brown hair fell to his ears in organized chaos, and, indeed, he was quite handsome.

When he had stood up to greet her earlier, she had noticed that he was lithe. His shoulders were not as broad; neither did they

look as strong as Lord Burke's.

His voice was surprisingly deep for his frame, but she did not particularly care for the sound of it. There was simply an air about him that made her want to put him at arm's length as much as possible.

Moreover, she was here for work, not a romantic liaison, and certainly not with a close friend of her employer.

Beyond that, she had dedicated herself to

a life of spinsterhood, and it would take more than a man like Lord Kinsley to change her mind.

Simply put, she was uninterested, and he would do well to keep his advances to himself.

Still, she was glad to learn that Lord Burke had such a close friend and his mother by his side. Now she knew that he had not entirely borne his grief alone.

He had people to hold his hands and

walk this path with him. It was more than she had been able to boast when her mother had died all those years ago.

It would appear that getting father and daughter to bond again might not be as difficult as she had thought it could be. This thought pleased her.

Chapter 7

Nathan stood in the grand hall, looking out of the window, down at the young ladies in the garden. Ever since Lady Willmington had arrived, there had been a lot of giggling and squealing in his household.

The silence that had clung to the walls like dried paint in their absence only seemed now to visit in the nights when everyone had gone to sleep.

Once the sun brightened the skies again,

everywhere he went, he could hear his daughter and Lady Willmington involved in one activity or another.

Day by day, whatever reservations he had harbored concerning hiring Lady Willmington faded into nothingness. Even a blind man could see that she was good for his daughter.

They had become more than governess and ward. They had become friends. He wondered if they had noticed how much he

spied upon them, as he was doing now.

Although many times, he made his presence known, such as when he joined them in the solar to supervise the lesson.

Lady Willmington appeared to be excellent at everything she did. She was a marvelous teacher, a patient instructor, and a loving friend. She was what anyone would call a perfect mother figure.

Eva respected and admired her greatly. It

made Nathan wonder if his daughter had not simply been rebellious all this while because she had been lacking such a mother figure.

The thought brought to memory a conversation he had shared with his mother over a year ago.

“She doesn’t only need her father, you know. She needs a mother, as well,” she began.

Nathan rebelled against the thought instantly, his whole being consumed with sudden fury. How could his mother dare to make such a

suggestion?

*“That is more than I can bear at present,
Mother. It is too soon.”*

*“Clara has been gone for two whole years,
Nathaniel. Surely, you cannot continue this way
forever? The official mourning period is over. You
are young still, and Eva ... she needs you.”*

*“It might be two years to you, Mother, but
to me, it feels as if it was only yesterday. The
pain is still fresh. I still see her in my dreams. I*

still smell her scent in the chamber. Clara is still very much a part of me. I will not betray her memory by bringing another woman into the home we once shared together.”

His mother shook her head, her eyes filled with sadness.

“It is what she would have wanted. For you to be happy. For you to love again.”

“Nonsense! You do not know that. No one does.”

“Nathani—”

*“Enough! I will hear no more of this
nonsense. I shall not remarry, and that is final.
Eva will do just as well without a new mother.”*

*With those words, he stormed out of the
hall, leaving his mother behind.*

They had never spoken of it again.

Recalling all that ... he could not help

but wonder ... if there had indeed been some truth to his mother's words

It was evident that the governess enjoyed spending time with his daughter as much as his daughter enjoyed spending time with her.

It did not matter if they were riding, painting, making embroidery, gardening, or having lessons. They always seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Eva had shown a massive improvement

in her behavior these past two weeks. She listened more and obeyed orders, so long as they were given by Lady Willmington or enforced by her.

Yes, she was still wild, as even Lady Willmington had not been able to get her to stop running everywhere, amongst other things, but the difference was clear.

Nathan felt both very grateful and hopeful. If things continued in this way, he was starting to believe just as strongly as Lady

Wilmington that she would be here for a very long time.

He still remembered the day she had come into his study to ask that he became more involved in his daughter's life.

At first, he had been put off by the fact that she had presumed she could tell him how to run his household and raise his daughter.

However, he had managed to see past his own feelings long enough to hear the truth and genuine care in her words.

It had stung to have an outsider express that they had taken notice of his less than commendable parenting, but afterwards, he realized that he had needed to hear those words.

So, in the days that followed, he had tried to do what Lady Willmington had asked of him.

He had quit trying after four days. They had been the most difficult days of his life.

The only features Eva inherited from him were his black hair and juttet chin.

All else was her mother's.

Her smile, her laughter, the way she squinted her eyes at the sun. The way she proudly squared her shoulders.

How gracefully she walked when she was not running. Her soft voice, her defiant stare ... Eva was Clara, remade.

The reason he had sent her away all those years ago had only become stronger. How could anyone expect him to breathe properly around her?

No. He could not take it. And, because he could not, he had crawled back into his cave, putting even more distance between them.

It hurt him to do this, yet he could not find a way around it.

It was at times like this that he wished Clara had never left. She was always the wise one. She would have known what to do.

Alas, if she had never left, he would not be caught in this dilemma. They would have still been one happy, complete family.

“Do you mind if I join you?”

Nathan looked up at Lady Willmington,

wondering what it was she wanted this time.

He had come here to the lounge for the peace and, of course, for tea. This was one of those moments when he preferred to be left alone.

The look on Lady Willmington's face told him she had something to say and did not intend to leave until she had said her piece. He had had enough experience with women to know that at times like this, one listened.

He cleared his throat, pulling his cup away from his mouth.

“Not at all, Lady Willmington. A very good morning to you.”

Smiling, she took her seat.

“It is a lovely one, is it not? The weather is so nice today. The air still smells of last night’s rain.”

She closed her eyes to breathe in for a

moment, then resumed pouring her tea. When she was done, she lifted the cup and relaxed in her seat.

“You can smell water in the air?”

“Mm-hmm. Can you not?”

“I can. I just have not met anyone else who can. I have always thought it strange.” It was the truth.

Peter and Clara would always laugh at

him when they caught him sniffing after a heavy downpour.

“Oh, believe me, it is not. All my sisters and I have that ability if you so wish to call it. In fact, just now, when you said you have not met anyone else who can, you were wrong. Eva has been sitting by the window all morning with her nose out. She enjoys the smell just as much as I do. I imagine you did not know that.”

Nathan was aware that it was perhaps

not Lady Willmington's intention to sound so accusing and mocking. Yet, he could not help feeling that way.

Trying to take the implied criticism like a man, he forced out, "No, I did not."

"Aah ... I suppose it is just one of those things she takes from her father. After all, the apple never falls far from the tree."

He nodded. "So I have heard."

The silence he craved returned, but it was not as comfortable as it had been before she arrived.

His thoughts were filled with how he felt regarding this new information and what more Lady Willmington wished to share that morning.

How much more about his daughter did he not know?

Soon, Lady Willmington finished her tea,

and, as she lowered her cup, she started talking again, robbing the silence.

“Speaking of Eva ... I am here because she has been asking some questions that I am afraid I am not fit to answer.”

Finally, ... we address the elephant in the room, thought Nathan. He too sat up, putting his cup aside.

“Oh? What questions?”

There was a small pause as she swallowed. “Questions like why you stopped joining our daily activities. She misses your presence.”

Nathan scoffed. “I doubt that. She barely seemed to take notice of me. She would not even look at me or speak to me.”

“You have not been present in her life for three years, Lord Burke. Please excuse her if she does not quite know how to act in your presence yet. The worst kinds of strangers are

familiar strangers. There is much awkwardness, but you must realize that it is not that she does not want to be around you. She simply does not know how to act. I do not mean to impose, my lord, but I do believe your engaging presence would do more to resolve this issue.”

“I see ... and did my daughter tell you all this? Or did you simply decide to speak for her?”

“No, not precisely, but she is confused.

That much I know.”

“Confused about?”

“About why you cannot ... will not spend more time with her.”

Nathan was trying hard to rein in his emotions, and he was slowly losing the war.

“Lady Willmington, this is the second time you have come to me to discuss my daughter. Both times, these discussions have

had nothing to do with her education. Am I to assume you are trying to tell me something? One might think you do not think I am a good enough parent to Eva?”

“My lord ... Certainly not! I would not dare to insinuate such. I was simply raising concerns, that is all. I care for your daughter, and I am concerned with her overall well-being.”

“Yes, truly, I am touched by this concern. Respect it, even. It is admirable. Nevertheless,

I shall remind you to know your place. You are to instruct, no more, no less.”

“Precisely, my lord. I am to instruct.

However, I cannot very well do my job now, can I? Not when your daughter looks up to me to fulfill needs that only a parent truly can...”

Lady Willmington wasn't smiling. It was perhaps the first conversation they had shared where that had happened.

That worried Nathan, and he feared he

had been too hard on her. However, he felt she had overstepped and was overstepping still. Who was she to tell him he was being a bad parent? And for the second time in a row?

Once again, he felt his very being had been bruised by this clever, brave woman.

“Your Grace, I cannot claim to understand your pain. However, I understand Eva’s. I too lost a mother, and I remember how lost and adrift I felt. Though I had to keep my chin up and care for my younger sisters, I

always wished that someone would do the same for me. My father, overcome with his grief, could not be that person. Eva is young, very young. These are her formative years. She needs you now more than ever. I would know.”

The sadness in her beautiful eyes, the gentleness in her voice pierced through him.

Of course, she'd understand.

He felt even more awful in that instant.

Selfish. He had been so selfish. Clara would have been disappointed. Still, his wounded pride would not succumb.

“Lady Willmington, I appreciate all of these things. However, for future purposes, I would advise that whenever you come to speak to me regarding my daughter, it should be about her education, not parenting. It would be best for all of us if you stuck to the curriculum. Thank you.”

With those words, he stood up to leave,

aware that he was more at war with himself
than anyone else.

Chapter 8

For the first time since Charlotte had arrived in the Burkes' manor, she was in a sour mood. Her conversation with the duke that morning had left a terrible taste on her tongue and a heaviness in her heart.

How could Lord Burke be so indifferent to his child's emotional needs? She had been wrong about him. Entirely wrong!

As she had sought him out earlier, she had been very hopeful that he would be

welcoming, as he had been the last time.

When he had stopped joining them after those first few days, Charlotte had simply assumed he was busy with state affairs and business matters.

Eva had not been happy about his absence, and Charlotte had tried as hard as she could to calm the child. Unfortunately, Eva would not be pacified.

The questions grew by the day, and,

finally, Charlotte had decided to see Lord Burke again and share this new development with him.

Now she knew without doubt that he was not a reasonable or understanding man; neither was he kind. He certainly did not care for his child.

After she had told him her story, she had thought he would feel remorse, change his mind, and promise to do better.

Instead, he had walked away with a warning. Ridiculous!

“Sum puella ... Eva, repeat after me. Sum puella.”

Eva jerked her head around to stare at Charlotte, wide-eyed. She could tell the child had not heard a word she had been saying.

“It means I am a girl, Eva. Sum puella.”

“Sum puella,” Eva repeated slowly. As

soon as the last syllable left her lips, she returned her gaze to the window. Charlotte sighed, closing the book in her hands, and placing it aside. It was obvious that she was not the only one who had things on her mind.

She had been trying hard to put her all into the lesson throughout the entire morning, but her thoughts kept returning to the conversation in the grand hall.

Eva on the other hand, would not stop looking out of the window and making

Charlotte repeat herself.

“Eva, sweetheart, look at me. Is something the matter?”

Eva turned to her again.

“Can I be honest?”

“Certainly. You know you can tell me anything.”

“I do not really want to have lessons

today. I am tired of learning. Can we go out to play? We study every day. Lady Willmington, you are my teacher, but you are also my friend here. Can we just for today do something different? Please?”

Charlotte heard her loud and clear. They had lessons for about three hours daily and then proceeded to other activities. There were times when these lessons could become overwhelming.

Since she had free rein over their

schedule, it was in her power to change things. A smile brightened her face as an idea formed.

“Eva, what do you say we have five days of lessons each week, and two days of play?”

The little girl’s eyes bulged. “Really?”

“Really. We could do anything you want during those two days of play, so long as it is safe. However, no more than two days a week, and only if you promise to fully concentrate

during lessons.”

“Yes! Yes! I promise! Oh, thank you,
Lady Willmington! Can we start today?”

Charlotte raised her empty hands,
grinning. “I would say we started five minutes
ago. So, what do you want to do today?”

“Can we go horse riding? We have not
been in a while.”

A while was no more than a week, but

long enough for an eight-year-old.

“Of course! Let’s go and change into our riding habits, and remember, you have to do as I say.”

Eva giggled at that, understanding Charlotte’s meaning.

“I promise.”

Before Charlotte could rise, Eva was already running out of the room to her

chamber. She remained in the solar for a moment longer, smiling as she shook her head. Eventually, she got up, closed the doors, and went after Eva.

“So, it is back to lessons tomorrow?”

Charlotte looked down to see Eva gazing up at her, eyes squinted to deflect the sun rays. They had just finished having a picnic after riding in the fields for the second day in

a row.

“Yes, Eva. Back to lessons.”

“That’s fair. We have had enough fun,
and we will not be having lessons all day long
anyway.”

“That we won’t.”

Eva said nothing more, and Charlotte was
happy to enjoy the comfortable silence.

She noticed the way Eva was taking to resuming lessons. The child appeared to be more reasonable and understanding than her father.

Perhaps she had gotten that from her mother.

The past two days had been good for both of them. They had ridden horses in the morning and had picnics in the afternoons. The evening before, they had worked in the gardens.

Charlotte had every intention of doing so again that evening. Her mood was significantly better, and Eva was cheerier than ever.

This new plan was here to stay.

Just as they reached the stairs that led to the chambers, Lord Burke came into view.

They stopped to greet him.

“Your Grace.”

“Father.”

“Lady Willmington, Eva ... I have heard that you were out having a picnic?”

“Just in the fields ... the sun is warm today.”

“Splendid. I know this is about the time when Eva has her nap. Please, let Cecilia lead her to her room. I would like a moment with

you. In my study, if you will.”

As he said those words, he turned to leave, not waiting for her response.

Charlotte wondered what he wanted. Had he thought about yesterday morning and decided he could not let it pass? Did he wish to scold her? Perhaps relieve her of her duties?

Silencing her thoughts, she followed suit, entering his study just as he did, and closing the door behind her.

He did not take his seat. Instead, he went to stand by the window.

“You wished to see me, Your Grace?”

“Yes, Lady Willmington. I realize that there are things which I must say to you.”

She held her breath, waiting for the worst. This was it. He was going to ask her to pack her things. Oh well, her sojourn at Wimshor had been brief and enjoyable. But

she was going to miss the manor, and Eva,
very much.

Cecilia too. They were already starting to
become fast friends.

As well as Lady Burke. Oh, next time,
Charlotte berated herself silently, hold your
peace.

“Lady Willmington?”

She pulled out of her thoughts to see the

duke staring at her with concern.

“Did you hear a word I just said?”

He had said something?

She blinked rapidly, trying to recall if she had caught anything, but she came up blank. Slowly, she shook her head.

“You have something to say to me?” she asked.

“Yes, but that was before ... I was saying ...,” he sighed. “I shall just go straight to the point. I have been thinking about yesterday and what you said ... also, how I reacted. I handled it very poorly, and I feel ashamed. I know that I must apologize for the way I spoke to you. There was no reason to be so rude. You were simply showing that you cared, and I was anything but grateful and gracious. I apologize for my behavior.”

Charlotte could not believe her ears. Lord Burke was apologizing. To her. For a moment,

she was at a loss for words.

Finally, she found her voice.

“Your Grace ... I ... I must admit I did not expect this at all. Rest assured; all is forgiven. I understand that I overstepped, and it will not happen again. It was not my place and—”

“My lady, please. You are Eva’s governess, not just her tutor. You are also her friend. You did not overstep, not at all.

Beyond that, you were entirely right. I should do better by Eva, and I would like to—for good, this time.” He paused. “I know it will not be easy. It has been so long that I feel like I do not even know how to be a father anymore. Still, the least I can do is continue to try. I only hope that you will help me. You are so good with her, and far better at this than I am.”

Warmth suffused Charlotte, and when her cheeks began to hurt, she realized that she was smiling too hard.

It would seem she had not been wrong about him after all. He *was* reasonable. He was man enough to realize, accept his faults, and apologize for them.

Not many men would do this.

“I, too, only try, Your Grace. It is all that truly counts. I am happy to help you with whatever is needed. Let us put the matter of yesterday behind us and only keep the lessons we have learned.”

She could see the relief wash over him.

He smiled at her then, and something stirred in her heart.

“I would like that very much. I hear that you have restructured the schedule?”

“Yes. We shall now have five study days and two play days, each week. I believe things will work better that way.”

“In that case then, I might not always

attend the lessons, as I would hate to intrude. I have seen enough to know that you are beyond capable. However, I would very much like to join the activities on play days. Please, remember to carry me along.”

This was good news. It made Charlotte happy.

Unlike the last time he had promised to do better, Charlotte had a feeling that this time he truly meant it and was going to give the attempt his all.

She nodded. "You may count on it. This will make Eva very happy."

"I hope so."

Aware that that was a dismissal, she bowed her head and turned to go. As she did, he stopped her.

"Lady Willmington?"

She half turned, so she could face him.

Her brow raised in question.

“Thank you.”

She nodded, understanding the full weight of those words.

She nearly skipped her way to her chamber as she left his study, giddy at how the day had gone.

Chapter 9

Nathan kept his eyes on the riders and their horses. He was entranced by the beauty of the race. The riders rode with a common goal in mind—winning.

They moved as one with their horses, tirelessly, effortlessly. And the horses? They were magnificent. The pounding of hooves, the flexing of calves. The ways their muscles bunched as they galloped. It was all so beautiful to watch.

He remained fixated, his heart thudding heavily as the riders raced harder. By his side, Peter stood transfixed, just like him.

With every moment that passed, the horses drew closer to the finish line. For the fourth time that afternoon, Nathan said a quick prayer in his heart that his rider would win the race.

Then, the most amazing thing happened. Nathan's rider, number four, started to catch up to the rider in first place, number six.

In no time, number four rode past number six, crossing the finish line first. The crowd went wild with applause and cheering as the whistle was blown, pronouncing number four the winner.

Nathan considered himself the happiest man at the tracks.

“Oh well, would you look at that! I have never seen a race turn so quickly! Looks like you have yourself a winner, Nathan!”

Nathan laughed, accepting Peter's congratulatory handshake.

“Looks as though I do! I have had two wins out of four races so far. Let's see what the last one has in store. If my rider wins the last, I myself will be going home a winner.”

“Absolutely! I cannot wait for it to begin!”

Neither of them said anything more, as

the crowd quieted and the tracks were cleared for the last race. After a moment, Peter spoke.

“I am glad you could come, Nathan. I have missed doing this with you.”

Nathan smiled at him, knowing exactly what his friend meant. With Eva’s return and Charlotte’s presence, he had been unable to leave the manor as often as before.

Not to mention, he always seemed to have a business or state affair to attend to. He

would not be at the tracks that afternoon if Peter had not pestered him into coming.

For that, he was thankful. It felt good to finally do something enjoyable and relaxing outside his home, accompanied by his closest friend.

“You are right, Peter. It has been a while.”

“Well, you are a father and duke. I am just an ol’ bachelor who has refused to settle

down.”

Nathan chuckled at that. “An ol’ bachelor who has his own fair share of responsibilities as earl.”

“True, but not nearly as many as you.”

“That is only because you have refused to find yourself a good woman and start a family. For the life of me, I still cannot understand why. You are not getting any younger, dear friend.”

“Aah, Nathaniel, do not start now. We were having such a pleasant time. Between you and me, we both know I am not one for that kind of life. Marriage, children ... they hinder men from enjoying the pleasures of life. Look at you! When last did you have a drink with the gentlemen at Stetson’s?”

Nathaniel opened his mouth to respond but never did. He was suddenly distracted by the new riders, who were taking their positions at the starting line.

Their conversation was quickly forgotten
as a bang sounded in the air.

The last race had begun.

It was just as fierce as all the others had
been before, and both friends watched in awe.

“Who do you have your money on?”

Peter asked.

“Number nine.”

Nathan's response made Peter's lips stretch into a grin.

“You have good eyes and great sense, my friend. I too placed my wager on number nine. You know, he has won every race this month. I am confident he will win this one, too.”

Peter's certainty reassured Nathan.

Silence descended between them again as their gazes were riveted on the riders.

In no time, number nine reached the finish line, winning the race.

The crowd went wild.

“It looks as though we are both going home as winners today!” Peter cried, laughing as he patted Nathan on the back.

“It looks like we shall, indeed. That was the best race today! My goodness! Truly marvelous!”

“That it was! Come now, let’s go and collect our winnings!”

Maneuvering through the crowd proved difficult, but they eventually managed to find their way out of the thicket of people.

With their winnings safely stowed in pouches in their pockets, they began to walk to their carriages.

“I am heading to Stetson’s. I assume you

will not be coming with me?”

“I would like to, but not today. Some other time. I promised Eva I would be home in time for dinner.”

Peter nodded, understanding. “Speaking of Eva, how is the darling angel? Still giving you trouble?”

Nathan smiled at Peter’s words. “Far from the case. She has been absolutely wonderful lately. It appears I have Lady

Willmington to thank for that.”

“Ah ... Lady Willmington. The other evening at dinner, I did notice how lovely she is. Properly beautiful, would you not agree?”

“She is a sight for sore eyes; that much I can admit. However, I do not see her in that manner. She is my daughter’s governess and friend. She has been so good for Eva. She has my utmost respect and admiration.”

After their last conversation, Nathan had

kept to his word and begun to spend more time with Eva and her governess during their play days. It had been awkward at first, but as time went on, Nathan found it had gotten easier.

Lady Willmington's presence helped to breach the gap between him and Eva. She also helped with nudges in the right direction when she thought that either of them needed one.

Now, he looked forward to those

moments, just as he was looking forward to dinner tonight.

The governess seemed to be the best thing to have happened to their family in a long time. She had his immense gratitude.

“From the way you talk, I daresay that is not the only reason why you admire her so. You did notice her fair looks. There is hope yet for you, my friend.”

Nathan frowned. “I am not sure I get

your meaning.”

Peter’s response was a soft chuckle. “Oh, come off it now, Nathan. Ever since Clara ... left, you have barely looked at another woman, much less thought of one as beautiful as she. If you have noticed Lady Willmington in that manner, then I am hopeful that you are not entirely a lost cause.”

His explanation did nothing to ease the frown on Nathan’s face.

“Am I to assume that you are trying to tell me something, Peter?”

Peter came to a stop, causing Nathan to do the same. They stood facing each other.

With a sigh, Peter spoke again. “I suppose I am. It has been three years, and you have never said a word about remarrying. I am aware it is not something you ever considered. I am only beginning to wonder if that is starting to change. If that is the case, it will be none too soon. Eva has returned. She is

growing by the day. Do you not think it is time to get a new wife? Someone that would be the companion for you and mother to Eva. Say, someone like the lovely Lady Willmington?”

Nathan could not believe his ears. Since when did Peter begin to have these concerns?

“Did my mother ask you to say these things?”

“Lady Burke? Certainly not. I am doing

this only as a friend. Your best friend. I care about you, Nathan. I wish to see you happy.”

“I am happy,” he answered quickly. Too quickly. It sounded like a lie he was forcing himself to believe.

Peter raised his brow, and Nathan heaved a sigh.

“Oh well, as happy as a man can be, given the circumstances. I have my daughter home with me. She is happy. With each day

that passes, the pain in my chest lessens when I look at her. We are beginning to form a bond between us. There is also Lady Willmington. I am happy that we have finally found Eva a governess with whom she happens to get along so well.”

“How about someone for you?”

For the first time since Clara’s death, Nathan found himself pausing to consider the thought.

Remarriage. Giving himself to another woman. Sharing his home with her.

For some odd reason, an image flashed across his mind. It was one he recognized all too well. Taken aback by this, he shook his head, rejecting the thought immediately.

Peter's words were starting to invade his thoughts disturbingly.

He did not need a wife, and Eva was doing very well with Lady Willmington and

her grandmother. There was absolutely no need for him to remarry.

“Stop speaking such nonsense. I do not need a wife, and neither do I want one. What is it to you anyway? You have refused to marry. Now you want me to remarry?”

“You and I are different, Nathaniel. You are the kind of man who has always wanted this kind of life.”

“And I have had it. We shall discuss this

no further. Lady Willmington is a wonderful governess and friend to Eva, and that is all she will ever be.”

But even as he said those words that sounded so right, he knew in his heart that he was starting to have doubts.

Was that all she would truly ever be?

Chapter 10

“Be careful not to hurt yourself!”

Charlotte cried, hoping that Eva would heed her warning.

If Eva had heard her words, Charlotte could not tell. The child continued to chase the squirrel she had been after all afternoon, giggling as her legs carried her about.

As always, Charlotte was pleased to see her charge so happy.

It had been a month since she began working for the Burkes, and she could see impressive changes in Eva.

She was not the only one.

Just the other day, Lady Burke had called her aside to commend her for a job well done so far. The improvement in the child's manners and mood was as obvious as day for anyone to see.

Eva still had the kind of energy Charlotte

could only dream of. However, beyond that, she had become a bundle of sunshine and joy.

There was almost always a smile on her lips. She listened more and adhered better to instructions, and she had done nothing so far to drive Charlotte out of the manor.

Since her father had become more involved with his daughter and their relationship was getting better, Eva blossomed like a flower in spring.

She was radiant. Still a handful on most days, but an absolute delight.

Their new schedule was proving to be the right decision. On days such as this, Eva played as hard as she was allowed, and when they returned to the solar for their lessons, she stayed committed and attentive.

They had finally found the right balance.

Charlotte lifted her hand in a wave, smiling as Eva stopped to wave and smile

back. The girl soon went back to chasing her squirrel, and Charlotte let out a soft chuckle.

Although Eva had her full attention, she was painfully aware of the man sitting on the other side of the bench.

When she had announced that she would be bringing Eva to the park for some sunlight and an opportunity to meet with other children, she had not expected Lord Burke to declare interest in joining them.

She had been taken aback when he announced that he would be coming along, and with a smile on his face, no less.

Now here they were, sitting next to each other and watching the girl they both adored and loved fiercely.

She shifted uncomfortably in her seat, her gaze still on Eva. She had lost count of the number of times she had caught Lord Burke staring at her.

Once again, she felt his gaze on her.

It was not a look of curiosity and intrigue as it had been when she had first arrived. No, this was different.

She had first noticed the change a fortnight before.

First to a look of approval, then acceptance, then admiration. Lately, when he looked at her, she could swear she saw a glimpse of affection in those eyes.

It confused her, even more so because Lord Burke was more than just handsome. The more time they spent together, the more she saw what a wonderful a man he really was.

He was trying very hard to be a great father to Eva and was excelling at it. He was also very kind to her. He was intelligent, humorous, in short, a complete gentleman.

When one considered these things and the fact that he was very attractive, it was

understandable that Charlotte believed she was beginning to feel some sort of affection for him as well.

She had refused to address these feelings, of course, finding them preposterous.

However, when he looked at her in this manner, it made it all the more difficult for her to ignore and refute those feelings. Almost impossible, in fact.

“You have made great progress with

Eva.”

Charlotte jumped out of her skin as his voice filled the air. Even though he was not so close, it felt as though he had whispered the words into her ear.

She turned to look at him, not sure she had heard him correctly. He was looking at Eva.

“I beg your pardon, my lord?”

He tore his gaze away from his daughter to look at Charlotte. As his eyes held hers, she felt a chill go down her spine.

There it was again ... that glimpse of affection. Although, it seemed more than a glimpse this time, too evident to doubt.

“I said you have made great progress with Eva. She almost seems like a new child. She is so much happier these days, vibrant, full of life yet courteous. I have you to thank for that.”

Charlotte's cheeks warmed as she gave a shy smile.

“I am only doing my job, Your Grace.”

“We both know you are doing more than that. You are more than I had hoped for. I do not know how we could have gotten by these past few weeks if my mother had employed anyone else but you.”

“Her Grace was so confident in her

choice when we first met. I will admit that I was surprised. However, after meeting Eva once, I became just as confident. We are like kindred souls, your daughter and me. I assure you, doing this makes me as happy as it makes her. We are good for one another.”

“You truly care about her. That makes me even more grateful.”

“She is a wonderful child. It is impossible not to care. I enjoy my job, being active and helping a child grow who is trying to cope

with loss. Nonetheless, it is Eva herself who makes this all the more rewarding. I do not imagine I would feel so connected to another child.”

“You are a wonderful woman, Lady Willmington. What you have done in such little time ... not just with Eva, but with me, as well. I keep thinking back to the confrontations we had when you first arrived. I am glad you came to me both times. It was ... not easy for me at first, accepting that a stranger was telling me how to raise my

daughter. Even harder knowing that you spoke the truth.”

“But you managed to get past that and look where we are today.”

“Indeed. Look where we are today. I have not felt this close to my daughter in three years. How do you do it? It is a gift you have, dear Lady Willmington. Being able to understand people so well and affect them so deeply.”

Charlotte's heart thrummed softly. She could not tell if it was his words, the way he was looking at her, or the fact that they suddenly sat closer than they had before.

She swallowed, pushing down the lump in her throat.

“You give me high praise, Your Grace.”

“No more than you deserve.”

“Thank you.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Lady Willmington, I assure you.” There was a small pause as he adjusted his coat.

“So, tell me, how did you end up here as a governess in my household? I realize there is much about you that I do not know. I have always been curious. I must confess; I had hoped that my mother would offer me the answers I seek, but she insisted I come to you.”

Charlotte’s eyes widened. *He had asked*

Lady Burke about her? This new piece of information gave her something to think about, but now was not the time.

“What do you say, Lady Willmington?
Would you humor me?”

How could she refuse?

He had that smile on his face that made it almost impossible for her to concentrate on anything else. A smile that made her want to tell him of all her fears and worries.

Once again, she swallowed—this time to wet her suddenly dry throat.

“Um ... I suppose there is not so much to know. I have lived quite an uneventful life until now.”

“Truly? I refuse to believe so. Why else would such a young and beautiful woman as yourself choose to become a governess?

Whatever story lies behind that reason can be nothing short of eventful.”

Charlotte was aware that Lord Burke had just called her beautiful. Her heart was still recovering from the beat it had skipped. The words played over and over in her head.

He thought her beautiful?

A soft chuckle escaped her lips in a bid to hide just how affected she was by his words.

Her cheeks burned red, and she wondered how much longer she could spend

in his presence without looking like a tomato.

“Well, I shall tell you what I can and you decide for yourself.”

“It would gladden my heart.”

She nodded and started. “As you know, I lost my mother ten years ago. I was only fourteen, and I had three younger sisters who looked up to me. We were all born two years apart. My father was too overcome by grief to take it upon himself to ensure our upbringing,

so I became the mother they needed. As the years passed by, I continued to commit myself to playing all the roles they required of me to be ... parent, friend, guardian. When I reached the age of eighteen, Father declared that I was going to have my debut into society. I obeyed, of course. It was a success, as much as it could be, considering the fact that I refused to marry. Nonetheless, I did have some suitors, and I continued to do so until the year I turned twenty and one summers. The number of suitors began to dwindle as they chose younger ladies.”

“Why did you not accept any of them?

They were not to your liking?”

“There were many impressive young men. A few who made my heart stir, too, but I had a greater responsibility to my sisters. If I had married, they would have been left all alone. I could not bring myself to do that; it was never a possibility. I had to stay there for them as I had always been. So, I refused all the suitors and remained with my sisters, seeing to their needs as they got married one

after the other, until the very last.”

“And that was when Mother came to you.”

“Yes. I was aware of what I was doing when I refused to get married all those years ago. I knew that by the time I saw my sisters all settled with men of their heart’s choosing, it would be too late for me. So, I made the decision to become a governess as soon as the last of them was married. Meeting the duchess, I can only say was fate. She came at

the right time, and here I am. Finally living for myself.”

“Are you happy?”

“Very much so and satisfied. I do not regret a thing.”

“Even though your sisters would live the rest of their lives building their own families, and you would never get to have the same?”

“You have no inkling how much the

thought of that certainty thrills me. I pray for them every day, that they never again suffer the kind of loss we had to suffer. To see them grow old and gray, happy with their families is all my heart desires.”

“Hmm. Lady Willmington, if I had thought you wonderful before, now I must tell you that you are simply phenomenal.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. You are a good man.”

His lips lifted in a smile. “Surely, flattery is not one of your many gifts.”

“Not at all. I only speak the truth.”

“I see. You handled your loss certainly better than I did, and at such a young age. I, too, know what it’s like to lose a parent. My father died four years ago. It was a dark time for me. Nonetheless, I had my mother, my wife, and my daughter. Three women who meant the world to me. When my wife, Clara, died only a year later, my life was turned

upside down. It felt as though I would never breathe again or feel happiness again. It has been hard, coping with the loss. The thought of the dukedom, my mother, and Eva is all that has kept me going.”

Charlotte listened as he spoke, her heart going out to him. He was no longer looking at her. He was staring into the far distance, looking at something only he could see.

“Surely, the pain lessens with time.”

He returned his gaze to her then. “I suppose it does. It does not hurt nearly as much as it did at the beginning. I still miss her, but I have learned to live without her.”

Charlotte nodded, understanding. Her mother had been gone ten years, and many times over those ten years, she had caught herself longing for the presence, touch, and comforting words of a mother.

She observed the duke, seeing him in a whole new light. She had gathered that he had

cared deeply for his late wife. Theirs had clearly been a love match.

This was the first time he had spoken of it to her. Charlotte was aware that something between them had changed. But she simply did not know exactly what it was or what to make of it.

She ached to reach out to him, but she kept her hands to herself. Words failed her. What could she possibly say to a man in pain? Thankfully, she did not have to say anything

for he looked at her at that moment, and the brightest grin lit up his face.

“What do you say we take a walk, stretch our legs for a bit? The maids will look after Eva.”

She found herself smiling just as brightly in return. “It would gladden me to do so.”

With those words, they rose to their feet and, side by side, engaged in light conversation as they walked for another hour

around the park.

Chapter 11

Nathaniel glanced at the wooden clock on the wall for the umpteenth time that evening. As he saw that there were only five minutes left until five o'clock, he pushed himself to his feet.

He had been in his study all day, filling ledgers and making certain all tallied. Now, he was famished and could not wait to share dinner with his family.

There was a particular person who made

him all the more eager to be at the dining hall. Closing the books and pushing his chair aside, he made to leave his study.

As he walked down the hallway to the dining hall, he could not help thinking of Lady Willmington.

He realized that he had been doing that often in recent times. Too often. Ever since that day at the park when they had shared a moment, she seemed to have found a way to always creep into his mind.

Unsettling? He was not quite certain yet. He did not know if he liked it either. All that he knew was that he was doing nothing to fight it.

It did not help matters that whenever she came to mind this way, his conversation with Peter at the racing tracks always followed.

Perhaps this was all his best friend's fault? Or perhaps, it was simply because Lady Willmington was the kind of woman to inspire

such thoughts in a man.

They had grown closer since that day at the park. He dared say they were becoming fast friends. She was full of warmth, light, and wit, and he could not help being drawn to her.

Peter had suggested she was the kind of woman he should consider taking for a wife if he wished to remarry. No bone in him opposed that.

He only wondered if he could truly love

again. Could he give himself all over again to another? To Lady Willmington?

Her face came to his mind, and he could see the twinkle in her eyes when she smiled, the curve of her lovely lips.

Feeling his cheeks grow warm, he shook his head, shaking the thoughts away.

If he kept having thoughts like this, it was only a matter of time before he lost his mind and did something utterly foolish. He

could not afford to let that happen.

It was best that Lady Willmington remained just what she was—a member of staff in his household—no more, no less.

A staff member for whom he was beginning to have very warm feelings...

He reached the dining hall, only to find that he was the first to arrive.

He took his seat at the head of the table,

acknowledging the servants who stood ready to wait on the family. The delicious aroma of the meal filled the air, and his mouth watered.

He soon heard footsteps and light conversation echoing against the walls as they drew nearer. From the voices, he could tell that it was his mother and Peter.

As they reached the table, he greeted them.

“Mother, you look radiant this evening.

Peter, nice of you to join us for dinner.”

“Thank you, Nathan. You look tired yourself. I have told you not to work too hard, lest you take ill.”

His mother’s concern was usual but touching still.

“I am as fit as a fiddle, Mother. I feel perfectly fine. Nothing a good night’s sleep will not fix.”

“You would not have to sleep alone if you would just find yourself a wife,” Peter chipped in, reaching for his seat as soon as he had helped Lady Burke’s into hers.

Nathan narrowed his eyes at his best friend.

“Who let you in anyway, and so late? Is this any time to pay a friend a visit?”

Peter chuckled as he settled into his chair. “I am only here for the food, wine, and

good company.” He made a point of turning to Nathan’s mother to smile at her. Then he continued, “Besides, there is no fit time to visit family.”

Nathaniel would have quipped, but he was distracted by the sound of footfalls and light conversation once again.

This time, there was a little bit of giggling and hushed whispers.

Women, he thought, smiling to himself.

They soon came into view, and the moment he saw them, he felt himself brighten within.

“Lady Willmington! Eva!” he chimed, resisting the urge to rise to his feet.

The two ladies paused to curtsy.

“Your Grace.”

“Father.”

A knowing smile passed between the pair, and he found himself itching to know what secret it was they shared.

“You ladies look especially lovely tonight, radiant, I daresay.”

That was Peter. Before Nathan could blink, the earl was rising to his feet and going around the table to pluck out chairs for Charlotte and Eva.

“Thank you, Lord Kinsley,” both ladies chorused. As Eva settled into her chair, Peter placed an affectionate kiss on her head. Then, he turned to take Lady Willmington’s hand in a kiss.

Nathaniel watched the moment, discomfited by the stirring in his heart. For some reason he could not quite place, he did not like seeing Peter so taken with Lady Willmington.

This was hardly a new sentiment though.

From the very first day he had introduced the pair, he had been unhappy at how Peter had unabashedly flirted with his daughter's governess.

It did not matter that Lady Willmington had only ever been polite in return.

He cleared his throat as Peter held on to her hand after the kiss, his gaze locked on hers, refusing to let go.

He did it again, and immediately, Peter

remembered himself, releasing the lady's hand. He helped her to her seat and went back to his.

Nathan decided there and then that whenever Peter joined them for dinner, *he* would be the one helping Lady Willmington into her seat.

His mother said grace, and when they had all chorused *Amen*, they began to eat.

The silence lasted for only a short while.

As they moved on to their second servings,
Peter began.

“Lady Willmington, Nathan here tells me
you have been tutoring Eva on a host of
subjects.”

Nathan raised his head to look from Peter
to Lady Willmington, his brows furrowed. She
seemed to have been caught by surprise as
well.

“Err, yes, my Lord,” Lady Willmington

replied.

“Wonderful! Which would you say you find most enjoyable?”

A smile flickered across her face. “I am partial to grammar, history, literature, biology, and chemistry.”

“A woman of art and science then, you are. I was right to believe you intriguing,” said Peter, his gaze locked on her.

“I spend most of my spare time reading. That has helped with my knowledge of a lot of things.”

“As I can imagine. I am quite the reader myself. A scholar, if I may say,” Peter bragged.

“Hmm,” Nathan huffed, growing more irritated by the second.

What was Peter doing? Everyone at the table turned to look at Nathan, but he remained fixated on his meal, refusing to meet

any gaze.

Soon they looked away.

“Truly? Then you are admirable, my lord,” came Lady Willmington’s sweet reply.

“As are you. So, what branch of chemistry interests you?”

“Hmm ... I must say I am impressed by Lavoiser’s work. The isolation of oxygen and discovering the role it plays in combustion is

simply genius! I wish for a time when I shall see all the wonderful practical experiments that he speaks of happen before my eyes.”

“Ah, Lavoiser ... science shall remember him for his great works for centuries to come. Until this day, the French regret what was done to him.”

Lady Willmington instantly sobered up, the light in her eyes disappearing. “Yes. It is a terribly sad thing.”

“And I am afraid not the kind of matters to be discussed at the dining table, forgive me. Still speaking of science, I have been doing a lot of study on matter in recent times. How it remains the same, whether it change form or not.”

“Thrilling, is it not? Do you carry out any experiments, my lord?”

“I have a friend who is a chemist. He owns a laboratory where he works all day. I visit from time to time to excite my eyes with

the wonders of science. I believe he would be happy to receive a visit from you, my lady, as well.”

Nathan saw warmth creep up Lady Willmington’s cheeks, turning them red. Her eyes remained on Peter’s, and it struck Nathan as an odd moment.

The sudden urge to call her attention to himself overwhelmed him, but he tightened the reins on his emotions. What was wrong with him?

Lady Willmington was simply having light conversation with his best friend. After all, their chatter was better than the silence they often endured.

If Peter became better acquainted with a new member of their household, was it not all for the best?

“You would do that for me, my lord?” It was as though she could not believe it.

“Certainly. You need only say yes.”

“I shall think on it, as well as a time that would be suitable to go. Thank you very much. I appreciate your kindness.”

Peter chuckled softly. “It is one I do not extend to many,” he joked, “but I find you worthy, Lady Willmington. Very worthy.”

Again, their gazes held, and this time around, Nathan did not resist the urge to break the moment. He cleared his throat,

pleasure running down his spine when the two suddenly broke eye contact and returned to their meals.

Lady Willmington turned to look at him. Her movement was so fast that he did not have time to turn away. She caught him staring.

It was an awkward, sweet moment, but he quickly looked away, catching his mother's eyes instead.

The duchess had a knowing smile on her face, and he could not help but wonder just what she was thinking.

“Lady Willmington?” Eva suddenly called, her voice meek.

They all turned to look at the child.

“Can I go to the la-bo-ra-tory with you and Lord Kinsley?”

Her question and obvious carefulness at

pronouncing a word she must have only heard for the first time that evening made everyone smile.

It was Peter who answered. “Certainly, Pumpkin. I am not sure it is a place for children, but I shall ask my friend to keep it safe enough so you can visit.”

Lady Willmington followed. “Well, in that case, I suppose you may come with us.”

Eva’s face brightened with a smile.

“Thank you, Lady Willmington! Thank you,
Lord Kinsley!”

Her gratitude was received warmly, and
the rest of the evening went by uneventfully.

Of course, every now and then, Nathan
tried to steal glances at Lady Willmington,
only to end up getting caught over and over.

She was so beautiful; he just could not
keep his eyes away for too long.

Finally, dinner came to an end, and Nathan rose, grateful that he no longer had to embarrass himself. Whatever it was that was happening with Lady Willmington, he had to get to the bottom of it.

He was afraid that if this continued, he might just as soon lose his mind.

His thoughts remained on her, as he found his way to his chambers after making certain the manor was secured for the night.

So, when he caught a silhouette in the hallway, he paused to wonder if he was truly seeing her or if she was simply a figment of his imagination.

Then he saw those twinkling blue eyes, and he knew he could not bring such vivid eyes to life.

Pretending not to see her in the dim light, he increased his steps, walking towards her until he bumped into her, their shoulders brushing.

A sweet sensation shot through his arms to his heart and belly at the contact, and his head reeled just for a moment.

He took a step back, feigning surprise.

“Lady Willmington! I did not see you there. I am so sorry. I hope I did not hurt you.”

She looked up at him, smiling. He could see her cheeks grow pink, and it pleased him.

It occurred to him then that he had not liked it when Peter had made her blush because he wanted to be the only one to do so.

“No, not at all, Your Grace. I am as much at fault as you are. I did not see you coming either. My mind was somewhere else.”

“Oh ... might I ask where?”

She nodded. “A letter arrived from my sister, Ana, while we dined. She is with child.”

“Oh! That is wonderful news! Is it not?”

“Absolutely! I am filled with joy. I was just thinking of all the gifts I could bring her and about arranging a day to pay her a visit in her country home. I am going to become an aunt for the third time.”

“The joy is just as great each time, eh?”

“Even more.”

“I offer you my congratulations, my lady.

You are free to take a week away if you so wish. Lord knows you have earned it.”

Her lashes fluttered as she blinked with surprise. “Your Grace! I had only hoped to ask for three days at most. A week? Oh my! You are most kind!”

“As I said, my lady, you have earned it. Let me know when you wish to leave. I shall make arrangements for one of the carriages to bear you to your destination safely and bring

you back. Although you might want to explain to a certain someone why you will be gone for that long.”

She smiled, immediately understanding his meaning. “I can manage that ... I hope.”

His response came swiftly. “I do not doubt that for a second.”

She said nothing, but her eyes spoke loudly enough.

He nodded, understanding, and deeply touched in ways he had not been in a very long time. For a moment, neither of them said a word. Then he broke the silence.

“This has been a lovely evening.”

“Yes, it has.”

“I suppose it is as good a time as any to call it a night.”

“That it is.”

He bobbed his head once more. “Very well then, I bid you goodnight, my lady. Rest well.”

“You too, my lord.”

With those words, he stepped around her and started to climb the stairs that led to their sleeping quarters.

Soon, he was in his chambers and ready for bed. As his head touched his pillows,

thoughts of Lady Willmington floated back into his head.

Now that his chest no longer felt tight from watching her and Peter converse so easily, he realized that the event at dinner had only made his admiration for her grow stronger.

Not many women were versed in the world of science. They were more drawn to art. Yet, Lady Willmington was a lady who knew her chemistry just as well as she knew

her literature.

Peter had been right. If there was ever a woman he would choose to marry, Lady Willmington would come first without a second thought.

Chapter 12

A sweet smile lingered on Charlotte's face as she retired to bed that night. She could not tell which was responsible—the news she had received from Ana or the special moment she had shared with Lord Burke.

She had been aware of his gaze upon her all evening at dinner. As she spoke with Lord Kinsley, it had been easy for her to see that, contrary to what she had previously thought, Lord Burke was not displeased by her presence at the dining hall.

He only seemed to have his face in a frown whenever Lord Kinsley decided to join them. It would appear the duke did not like his friend's budding friendship with her.

She wondered if he realized that that could be called jealousy. Even she found it difficult to believe.

Why would Lord Burke be jealous of his friend? Did he have any interest in her?

Did he not? The way he looked at her.

The way he had looked at her only a short while ago below the stairs. It made her body hum all over.

It felt as though she was eighteen summers again, entering society for the first time and being courted by the finest gentlemen of the ton.

Therein lay the problem. Lord Burke had made no attempt to court her, yet he made her swoon just by his mere presence and gaze.

Every now and then, she caught herself thinking of him in ways that no employee should think of their employer. Yet, she could hardly be blamed.

To have a man like the duke look at her with such profound admiration and affection as he had done that night, would make anyone blush and feel faint.

Even now, she could feel her cheeks heating up again.

She brought her hands to her face,
giggling like a child.

Goodness! It appeared that the good lord
was affecting her even more than she had
thought. As her eyes fluttered closed, he was
there in her dreams, waiting for her.

The next morning, Charlotte joined Lady
Burke for tea on the balcony. This had become
a ritual for them. Once every week, they sat
there to take tea and discuss everything and

nothing.

Charlotte was aware of how lucky she was to have found such a loving household as this, where everyone welcomed her with open arms and saw her as a part of the family.

“The sky is so bright today,” Lady Burke said, as though she was thinking aloud.

Charlotte nodded slowly as she raised her cup to her lips and sipped.

“It is. The blue is vivid and the white so clear.”

“There are no clouds, but I have a feeling there will be a mild storm tonight.”

“Eva shall sleep all the more peacefully if that happens. She loves storms.”

Lady Burke turned to look at her then, a smile on her face. “You have learned so much about the child in such a little time. You are so good with her.”

“She is very endearing.”

“And you are very observant. You have a keen eye and a sharp mind. You know, you remind me of myself when I was much younger. Although, I do not think I was half as good with children as you are. Lord knows I was near oblivious when Nathaniel was born. All I knew was that I loved him. So fiercely that I would give my life for him.”

“I have heard that such is a mother’s

love.”

“Hmm. I have no doubt that if you are ever faced with harm, Charlotte, you would throw yourself in front of Eva to save her.”

Charlotte answered swiftly. “Certainly, without a thought.” She meant every word.

Lady Burke’s lips spread in a smile. “I thought so. Would you then say, Charlotte, that you have come to see Eva as yours?”

The question confused Charlotte. She did not know what answer would be the correct one. She had come here as a governess, not with a wish to take the place of a mother in the child's life.

Yet, if she responded no, would it not displease the duchess?

“Raising my sisters honed what motherly instincts I already had inside of me. Caring for Eva, those instincts have grown even stronger. If I would give my life to save hers, it is

because I love her, and deep down in my heart, I know that it is right.”

“Ah. Indeed, such is a mother’s love.”

The wink that accompanied those words told Charlotte that she had answered correctly, and she released a breath she had not realized she had been holding.

“He was such a small child, my Nathan. Who would have thought he would grow to be so tall, with such a commanding presence? He

fills up any room he walks into.”

Charlotte could hear the pride in her voice. Loud and clear. This made her smile.

“When he started to grow bigger, taller, it was like watching a miracle happen before my very own eyes. He never caused me any worry. Surely, he got up to some childish antics, but nothing that got him into any real trouble. He took the best parts of us. When his father saw the man he had grown into, he was so proud and he died a happy man knowing

that he was leaving all of this ..." she gestured at the house and fields, "in capable hands."

Charlotte sipped from her cup again, aware that Lady Burke only needed her to listen.

"He reminds me so much of his father. His calm, his eyes, his soul. Oh, but his heart and the charm and wit, those he got from me."

This time, Charlotte let out a soft chuckle.

“Charm?” she asked teasingly.

“Yes, charm.”

“Pardon me, my lady, but I have yet to see any charm. He broods most of the time.”

Lady Burke broke into a gale of laughter at those words. Charlotte was again relieved that she had not taken offense.

“I told him he would scare the ladies

away if he kept up with that. Ah ... Nathaniel does have charm. He simply has not found any use for it since ...”

She did not complete the statement, but Charlotte understood. Especially as she instantly sobered.

“You should have seen him when he went after Clara. The poor girl did not stand a chance. She fell hopelessly, and, even after their marriage, Nathan continued to court her. He loved her dearly, and the whole world

knew it. They were so happy together.”

Lady Burke paused to sip her tea, then continued.

“His father and I ... ours was not a love match. Yet, he always did right by me. Within months, we grew to love each other, and, in the years that followed, he proved his love for me daily. We were married two-and-thirty summers. Not one day did I ever regret my decision to be his wife. When he breathed his last, it felt as though my whole world had

been torn apart. I was so lost. Holding onto the memories we shared all those years helped me to find my way back.”

Lady Burke paused again to wipe the side of her eye. Charlotte’s heart ached. She could hear the pain in the duchess’s voice.

“It was hard for Nathan, as well. He had just lost his father. That meant he had to become duke. Daunting new responsibilities had to be taken on, while he mourned the loss of a man he had loved, respected, and admired

dearly. It was not easy for him, but we had each other. He had Clara. Then, a year after that, Clara, too, went to rest.”

Lady Burke drew in a ragged breath and continued. “It was unbelievable. I feared I would lose my son, as well. He was beyond devastated. At least, I had had enough time with his father. Nathan and Clara had only just begun their lives together. It was too soon. She had been called away too soon. When he told me that he could not bear to have Eva around as she looks so much like her mother, I

understood. I did not want to leave him alone but staying would have only made his pain worse. So, after Clara was laid to rest, I took the child, and we went on to the estate in Wimsley. We stayed there three years.”

“Did he visit often?”

“Every now and then. Sometimes, I visited here. The arrangement was only meant to last a few months, a year at most. However, the more Eva grew...”

“The more she looked like her mother,” Charlotte completed. She had never seen a portrait of the late duchess. She knew that if she ever came across one, she would recognize the woman in it easily.

“Precisely. It was difficult for Nathan. I worried that he would never be able to see past his hurt and love his daughter as he should. And Eva ... she was so confused, angry, and sad ... I tried to support her as much as I could, but it was her father she truly needed.”

“Her governesses...?”

“She rejected every one of them. I could not fault her. No one could. She was just so hurt. To her, it felt as if she had been abandoned by her mother and father. In a way, she had. I was so happy when I heard of you, Charlotte. The wedding was not the first time I saw you. I told you I had been watching you for a while.”

Charlotte nodded.

“The first time was at the Gerald’s ball. It was the first time Mary, your sister, entered society.”

“Her debut.”

“Yes. You came in side by side, and though Mary is such a beauty that could steal the breaths of men, it was you who stole mine. I just knew it, deep in my heart without a single doubt, that you were the one. Oh, but it was not yet time. So, I waited patiently until

the time was right.”

“And here we are.”

“Indeed. Here we are. Every day, Charlotte, you prove to me that I was right to trust my intuition. Eva is such a happy child. I no longer see glimpses of the angry and hurt child I alone raised for three years. Yes, there are some days when the sadness beckons, but you are always there to chase it away.”

“Being with her makes me just as happy.”

“Even a blind man can see that. Ah ... there is more. Eva’s is not the only life you have managed to touch. I see some difference in someone else.”

Charlotte raised her brow, although she already knew of whom the duchess spoke.

“Nathaniel. There is a spring in his step these days. He smiles more often. You think he broods? You should have met him before you entered our lives. I suppose having you here

and seeing how his relationship with his daughter has transformed has given him some sort of peace and joy.”

“He loves Eva very much.”

“That he does. Lately, I am beginning to wonder if he is starting to love someone else.”

Lady Burke’s eyes held Charlotte’s meaningfully, and she was forced to look away, blinking hard. That moment had been intense.

Her heart suddenly beat faster in her chest, and her stomach squirmed at the possible implications of the duchess's words.

Surely not?

“I was right to have chosen you, Charlotte. You have brought order, and light, and affection to my household. I shall be delighted to see just how much more you have to bring still. Thank you.”

“I assure you, Your Grace, it gives me great pleasure.”

“I know. I know.”

Hours later, as the sun said its slow farewell, Charlotte could not stop thinking about her conversation with the duchess that morning.

Grandmother and granddaughter had stepped out earlier in the afternoon. Lord Burke had been gone all day, leaving her

alone in the house to have time to herself.

So, she had filled her time with reading and riding, and her mind with Lady Burke's words.

She was glad that everyone in the household recognized her efforts and appreciated them greatly. She was pleased to know that she was doing her job well.

Hearing the duchess speak of her late husband had made Charlotte feel closer to the

family. It was clear to see that the duchess had loved her husband, just as Lord Burke had loved his wife.

The late duchess sounded like a wonderful woman. She had left shoes so big that no one else could fill them. It was no wonder His Grace had refused to remarry.

She was so lost in her thoughts as she returned from the stables that she did not see Lord Burke.

“Lady Willmington!”

She stopped short in her tracks, her eyes widening in surprise.

“My lord! You have returned.”

He nodded. “Yes, just now. I was told you were out riding.”

She had not seen him all day. Doing so now, she could not tell whether it was how handsome he looked or the surprise his sudden

appearance caused that set her heart beating so hard.

“It seemed such fine weather for one. I thought it would be nice to pass the time, although the clouds are starting to gather. It is why I returned. Lady Burke did say that she thought there would be a mild storm tonight.”

“In a few hours or so, yes. Mother is never wrong about these things.”

“Then they should be returning home any

moment now.”

“They have. Shortly after I arrived. Did you enjoy the ride?”

She nodded. She moved to say something but was suddenly at a loss for words. He was doing it again. Looking at her in that manner that sent shivers down her spine.

“Lady Willmington?” he called out.

Embarrassed, she shook out of her haze.

“Yes? Oh yes. Certainly. It was wonderful.”

“Well, perhaps next time you feel like a ride, you might not object to some company. I would be happy to accompany you.”

Had he just declared a desire to go riding with her?

“That would be lovely.”

“Speaking of company ... there is a play on at the theater, a few days from now.

Friday, to be precise. I would have taken Eva, but I am afraid she would not appreciate it. I wondered if you would care to accompany me?”

Riding together, now a play? It felt too much at once. Too much that pleased her greatly.

Smiling, she replied, “I would love to.”

“Thank you, Lady Willmington. I suppose I shall see you at dinner?”

She bobbed her head. “Certainly.”

“Until then.” With those words, he turned to go into his study.

As he left, Charlotte felt the weakness in her knees, one she had not noticed had been there during the whole of her conversation with Lord Burke.

Those eyes. There was something about those eyes.

Chapter 13

Nathan was glad that this play was one he had seen before.

He would return home knowing that he had missed many of the acts simply because his attention had been held by an even more enthralling sight all afternoon, and he would have no regrets.

She was a sight to behold.

As he had watched her come down the

stairs earlier in the day, he had suddenly forgotten how to breathe. Then, she had smiled down at him, and his heart had stopped.

She had chosen a lovely yellow dress for the outing. Placed against her rosy skin, she was more radiant than ever. Simply divine!

All through the ride, it had been an impossible task to keep his eyes off her. He had hoped that when the play began, it would hold his attention firmly enough.

An hour passed and he knew that, too, was impossible. He still could not tear his gaze away from her. For all he knew, there could be chickens on the stage talking in human language, and he would still find her more riveting.

She gasped in fear, leaning into him at the same time and reaching for his arm.

He smiled as her delicate fingers wrapped around his left arm, as her head brushed

against his shoulders.

For a fleeting moment, he looked at the stage to see what had frightened her. When his gaze returned to her, he caught her staring at him.

Her cheeks flamed, and she quickly pulled away, pulling her lashes down in a way that made his stomach clench.

By God! She was doing something to him, this woman!

His cheeks began to hurt from smiling for so long, as he watched her look around the box, wondering if anyone else had caught the moment.

Behind them sat Peter and his lady friend. Nathaniel doubted they had seen what had just happened. The pair appeared to be fixated on the play.

“I am sorry,” Lady Willmington whispered as she, too, affirmed that no one

else had seen.

The sudden urge to tease her overwhelmed him, and he gave into it. Leaning in, he whispered in her ear, “You do not have to be, my fair lady. I am here to protect you, whatever may be the case. Never fear, my arms are strong enough.”

She blushed so hard; she could not dare look him in the eye. It thrilled him to no end to see how much he affected her.

It was just as well. She affected him just as much, maybe even more so. Being so close to her, it made his heart thrum a lovely tune.

“Thank you, my lord. You are so kind.”

“Nathaniel. Or Nathan ... whichever pleases you. I believe it is high time we dropped the formalities. We are friends now, are we not?”

It was only then she turned to face him. Still, she could barely hold his gaze.

“Friends?”

He nodded. “Good friends. After all, we are here at a play together, and we have grown closer in the past fortnight. Do you not think so?”

“I ... Well ...”

He raised his brow, and she shut her mouth. He watched as she swallowed hard before trying to speak again.

“I suppose you are right. I did not dare to think of us in that way, seeing as you are my employer.”

“No matter, we can still be friends. We are friends.”

She smiled at him then, finally holding his gaze, hers unwavering.

“In that case, I shall call you Nathaniel. But only if you call me Charlotte.”

“Charlotte,” he responded. It was the second time he had said that name out loud. It tasted like honey on his tongue.

“It is such a lovely name.”

“Thank you. As is yours—a strong name, that is.”

She was red all over, and he knew he should not be getting so much pleasure from seeing her so flustered. But it thrilled him no

end.

There was a clearing of a throat from behind them, followed by...

“I bought tickets to watch one play, but it would appear there is another happening right before my eyes, in this box.”

It was Peter, teasing as always.

They had finally been caught.

Reluctantly, Nathaniel pulled away from Charlotte. Then, he half-turned so he could see his friend.

“I suppose you shall have to pay me, too, then for providing a measure of entertainment?” He could hear the smile in his own voice.

“I shall consider it,” came Peter’s reply.

No more words were said for the rest of the afternoon. However, Nathan and his fair

lady kept stealing glances.

As the play neared its end, Charlotte leaned into Nathan of her own accord, and they remained that way until it was over.

Nathan could not remember a time when he had been so happy.

“I had such a delightful time,” Peter announced as they reached their carriages after exiting the theatre.

“We must do this again, all four of us.

Don’t you think?”

The women murmured in agreement.

Nathan shared the same thought.

He looked at the woman by his side,
smiling as he remembered how much they had
flirted all afternoon.

“I think that would be wonderful. Yes,
we must certainly do this again.”

They made small talk for a little while longer. Eventually, they said their farewells, each pair getting into their respective carriages and heading home.

As the wheels rolled down the street, Nathan found himself looking forward to another such time.

Chapter 14

When they arrived home that evening, Charlotte was still in awe of all that had happened in the theatre. On the ride back, she had been too shy to hold his lordship's gaze or make light conversation.

She kept playing the scenes over and over in her mind. Nathaniel had declared that they were friends and demanded that the formalities be dropped.

Nathaniel ... the first time she had said

his name aloud, it had felt like hot butter against her tongue. Rich, exotic. She had always thought it was such a fitting name for the kind of man that he was.

To address him so informally and on his request was nothing short of exciting.

It could have been all in her head, but she was almost certain that Nathaniel had flirted with her.

No, certainly she had not mistaken those

looks, the way he had held her gaze, and how she had felt that pair of beautiful eyes on her all afternoon.

She doubted if he had caught any moment of the play. He hadn't been able to bring himself to stop looking at her.

At first, when the play began, it had made her uncomfortable. As the play progressed, she began to grow warm; her insides began to squirm, her heart tingled and her mind grew fuzzy.

In all honesty, she could not tell if she had truly enjoyed the play, as she had barely been able to pay attention. His presence, the heat he exuded just by being there. It had all been too much distraction.

She had been painfully aware of him sitting there beside her at every moment. If she told her sisters this, they would accuse her of losing her mind, and they would not be so far from the truth.

She was beginning to have feelings for Nathaniel. Strong feelings that she did not know what to make of or do with.

All she knew was that they made her feel alive, bright, and happy, and the thought that they could be returned, that Nathaniel, too, felt something for her, made things all the more thrilling.

She was not naive or foolish enough to begin to hope or dream. She was aware that nothing could come of it.

After all, she was just a governess. The first daughter of a baron, and he a duke. And a man who was still very much in love with his late wife.

How could she believe she could be the one to fill the shoes that had been left behind? Did she even wish to take another woman's place?

She shook her head, driving the thoughts away as she got into bed and drew the covers

up to her chin.

What was this nonsense she was thinking? Marriage? To Nathaniel? The man had only just declared that afternoon that he considered them friends. No more, no less.

She would do well to not get ahead of herself. It was she who had resigned herself to a life of spinsterhood, believing that seeing her sisters live the life she secretly wanted for herself would be enough.

It would be needful to keep remembering that, lest she let herself get carried away by these budding feelings for Nathaniel and silly wishful thinking.

She? A duchess? Now that she thought of it again, it was almost laughable. There would be no more of this nonsense, she decided.

With that, she closed her eyes and let the wiles of sleep carry her deeper into the land of dreams.

Charlotte was in the garden, knee deep in dirt, her gloved hands covered with soil. The sun shone above her, warming the land, chasing away the chill that had accompanied the rain of the night.

It was the kind of warmth she welcomed. Evidence of the downpour lingered in the air as fresh scents, and in the soil as puddles of water.

She had not experienced such fine weather in a while. She knew that in another

hour or two, the scent of water in the air would be completely gone and the puddles dried up.

It was why she had decided to make the most of this moment.

When Lady Burke had announced that morning that she would be taking Eva to London to visit some friends, Charlotte had immediately known what she wanted to do with her day.

Gardening was just the first item on her list, and she was enjoying it so far.

Beads of sweat broke out on her brow, and she wiped them away with the back of her hand. After two more pats down around the flower she had just planted, she sat on her heels to examine the fine work she had accomplished that morning.

Twenty more flower beds made. There were finally daisies in the Burkes' garden. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips, and she

gave in to it, thoroughly pleased with herself.

She would rest, drink some water, and then she would return to plant some more.

As she rose to her feet, a voice sounded behind her.

“I was told you were hiding here.”

She wasn't startled, only surprised, pleasantly so. Her smile grew wider as she turned around to face Nathaniel.

Was there ever a time when he wasn't so handsome? All he had to do was come within a few feet of her and her heart leapt for joy.

“I take it you were looking for me?”

He nodded, clasping his hands behind him as he began to close the distance between them.

The urge to take a step back overwhelmed her, but she fought it. The closer

he drew, the faster her heartbeat. The butterflies inside her stirred from their slumber.

Finally, he came to a stop just a few feet away.

“The house seemed too quiet. I know I have Eva’s absence to thank for that. However, I was suddenly reminded that if she was out of the house with my mother, it meant you were all alone. I thought it would be nice to keep you company.”

She broke eye contact, looking away to hide her blush. Not that it helped, the smile on his face told her he saw anyway.

“You did not have to come. I imagine you must be busy running state affairs and the family business.”

“True, but there is always time for a good talk with loved ones, is there not?”

She looked back at him then, her eyes

slightly widened at the thought that he had referred to her as a loved one.

She saw a twinkle in his eye, as he broke his gaze to inspect the work she had done.

“It appears there is nothing you do not excel at. Day by day, I am more convinced that you are an angel. There is no way an ordinary human could be so perfect.”

If she died, it would be from all the palpitations this man caused her heart. What a

tale it would be ... *the lady who died from too much happiness.*

“Well, I do know one thing you are great at, my lord...”

“Nathaniel,” he corrected, looking back at her. “I’m curious to know what that is.”

“Flattery. You have a way with words, so much so that if one was not careful, they would grow dizzy from happiness.”

“If that were so, it would appear my gift has no effect on you, as I am yet to see you swoon.”

Oh, she was swooning ... she did not know how she was doing such a good job at hiding it. Why had he come out here today? Did he really care about her so much that he could not bear the thought of her being alone?

She chuckled softly, not knowing what to say.

“I do not flatter you, my lady. Whatever words I say to you, I beg you to always know that they are true and from the depths of my heart.”

She heard as much sincerity in his voice as she saw in his eyes. Charlotte had never been in love, so she did not know exactly what it felt like.

Although, she believed she was starting to have an inkling.

She swallowed hard, forcing an invisible lump down her throat.

“I do not know what to say ... your words, they affect me in ways I am afraid I cannot speak of. Contrary to appearances, I am not immune to your charms.”

He raised his brow, feigning surprise.

“Truly?”

She felt as though she was opening herself up, giving her heart away, but it could

not be helped. There was no going back now.

When next she had tea with Lady Burke, she would tell her that her son indeed had charm and that she was well-enchanted.

Slowly, she nodded, against her better judgment. “Yes, truly.”

He stepped forward then, his face radiant with a happy smile.

“Ah ... if that is so, then I am most

pleased to hear it. I was beginning to grow weary with fear that I was alone in my feelings.”

He stopped. There was no longer distance between them, and she did not have it in her to create any.

She held her breath, wishing the butterflies would not cause so much fuss.

He raised his hand then, and she stilled as his fingers came to rest on her hair. She had

tied the long locks up, but a few strands must have slipped free.

Tenderly, with a touch so soft it felt like a feather, he tucked those stray strands behind her ear and cradled her chin.

“So beautiful,” he whispered. “You are so beautiful, and I am helpless against *your* charms.”

Her mind was in a muddle, so much so that she could not think one coherent thought.

All she could think of was the myriad of emotions his closeness, touch, gaze, and words were making her feel.

Goodness! How could she resist such a man? *How? Impossible.* Only a woman with no blood in her veins would be immune. Fortunately, her heart beat harder than it ever had, pumping tirelessly.

That was why, when he tilted her face and began to lower his, she could not bring herself to step away, helpless to do anything

to stop him. He gave her time to refuse, to say no, but she wanted this.

By God, she did.

With her whole being. The flames that licked through her nerves, the shivers that had made their home in her spine, the weakness that threatened to make her knees give in.

All of her wanted this.

Her eyes fluttered closed, and she found

herself rising on her tiptoes to meet him.

Anytime, anytime now, their lips would touch,
and she would feel soul-wrecking bliss.

“Lady Willmington! Lady Willmington!”

Charlotte roused, startled, confused, with
mild aches at the sides of her head.

What was that noise? And why was it so
dark in here? After all, she was in the garden,
was she not?

The voice that had interrupted such a sweet moment sounded again, this time louder, accompanied by urgent knocks. Whoever was on the other side of the door sounded worried.

“Lady Willmington! Please tell me you are all right. I am afraid if I get no response from you, I shall have to come in.”

Everything suddenly fell into place then. Charlotte looked down to see that she was still in her nightdress.

Everywhere was dark because she was still in her chambers. The curtains were still drawn closed, and, oh goodness ... she had just been woken up from sleep.

A dream. It had all been a dream. But of course! That was the only explanation for it.

Whatever had been happening between Nathan and herself had been too good to be true. She should have known. She should have pinched herself awake.

She lifted her hands to her lips, smiling like a girl fresh out of a schoolroom.

They had almost kissed.

If only Cecilia had waited a moment longer, she would have experienced such a wonderful feeling, even though only in her dreams.

“Lady Willmington? That’s it. I am coming in!”

Those words shook her out of her reverie completely, and she quickly called in response.

“All is well, Cecilia! I was deeply asleep, is all. You may enter.”

The door opened, and Cecilia stepped in. There was worry etched into her features. Seeing her so disturbed made Charlotte ache with guilt.

Poor girl...

The worry soon faded away after a quick examination that must have satisfied the maid. Cecilia finally held her mistress's gaze, smiling.

“You do look fine.”

“I am. I scared you, did I not? I apologize. I have not slept so deeply in a while.”

Cecilia stepped further into the room,

going straight to the windows to draw the curtains.

Charlotte flinched as light spilled in.

“His Grace said you must have been tired from the trip to London yesterday. He asked that you not be disturbed, but when noon came and you had not come down the stairs...”

Charlotte’s eyes flew open with horror.

“Noon? It is past noon?”

Cecilia turned to face her. “Y—yes, my lady. The clock struck twelve about half an hour ago.”

“Oh, my goodness!” Flinging the covers away, Charlotte jumped to her feet.

Immediately, she began to pace around the chamber.

“Get me bath water! Pick a dress from the wardrobe for me. Something simple,

warm! Oh, my goodness, Eva! We were meant to have lessons this morning! What have I done?”

“Err ... about that, Lady Willmington. His Grace took it upon himself to tutor the young Lady Burke. They have been in the solar together all morning.”

Her horror multiplied. She stopped in her tracks to cradle her face; her eyes widened in disbelief.

It was not enough that she had woken up late because she had been dreaming inappropriate dreams of her employer. He had also taken it upon himself to do the work that she had been employed to do.

“Oh, goodness. Now I have done it.”

Chapter 15

Charlotte was mortified. It took her another half an hour to get ready for the day and go down the stairs. By the time she arrived at the solar, Nathaniel was already finishing the day's lessons.

She slipped in quietly and sat in the shadows, wondering how she was going to explain herself. It was the first time such a thing had ever happened to her, and she was too embarrassed to admit the reason why.

Thoughts of her dream still flashed through her mind, filling her with those sweet, tingly sensations which she should not be having or, at the very least, entertaining.

So, pushing those thoughts away, she focused on the beautiful sight before her. Nathaniel tutoring his daughter.

Charlotte had never seen Eva so attentive during a lesson. She was looking up at her father as though he was her hero. One could tell she was hanging on to his every word.

He was a good teacher, Charlotte could see. Gentle, firm, warm, and kind. The small smile he kept on his face and his lovely calming voice made the message he was passing on so much easier to receive.

Charlotte completely understood why his child was looking at him with so much adoration in her eyes. He inspired such strong emotions in her, too, and she was not an eight-year-old or his daughter.

“That will be all for today, Eva. Now, I know I am no Lady Willmington, but I hope I did well enough and you enjoyed the lesson.”

As Nathaniel finished speaking, Eva jumped to her feet and ran to hug him around the waist tightly. Charlotte saw him freeze in shock, but he quickly got over it and lifted her into his arms.

“I suppose that is a yes?” he asked, grinning.

Eva bobbed her head. “I love Lady Willmington, but I hope you will come back to tutor me again.”

Charlotte chuckled at this. The soft laughter was a sweet release for all the pent-up emotions, not to mention that the tightness in her chest lessened that was a result of the sweet moment she had just witnessed. The warmth remained though, and one tear broke free from her eyes.

She quickly brushed it away, focusing on

the rich sound of Nathaniel's laughter instead.

Mortification forgotten; her heart grew large from the immense pride she felt in that moment.

It seemed ages ago when she had declared that she would reunite father and daughter. Weeks later, look at where they were. She had accomplished what she had set out to do.

If there was nothing else that she had

achieved in her time with the Burkes, this alone was enough, and she mentally gave herself a pat on the back. She had done well, even if she said so herself.

Of course, she had help from both of them. Their willingness to put all the sadness behind them and embrace love had made her task easier.

So, she reveled in this blessing, knowing that she could worry about the consequences of her actions later.

Later came much sooner than expected, for father and daughter broke away then. As soon as Nathan put Eva on her feet, she came to Charlotte.

“Lady Willmington! You are up! Father said you were tired. Are you well now? Did you take ill? Please don’t fall ill, Lady Willmington. I do not want to lose you, too.”

Touched by the little girl’s concern, Charlotte took her into her arms and more

tears dropped. She was glad that Eva did not see them, but Nathan did.

She held onto Eva, avoiding his gaze.

Those words hit deep. She understood the child's fears. Her mother had died after being ill for some time.

“Oh, sweetling, I am sorry I made you worry. I promise you, I am fine, fit as a fiddle. I only slept in for too long, but thanks to Cecilia, I am awake now.”

She held Eva until she was done wiping her tears. When she was certain they were completely dried, she broke the embrace.

Eva peered up at her, as though looking for signs that she had not been completely honest.

“Your eyes look puffy,” she said, narrowing hers.

“Only from too much sleep,” Charlotte hurriedly assured.

“So, you are truly well?”

“Perfectly so. There is no need to worry. I am not going anywhere.”

“I am glad! I smell biscuits. I think I’m going to go and beg Martha to give me some.”

With those words, she dashed out of the solar, leaving Charlotte and Nathaniel alone.

Charlotte shook her head. *Children ... it*

had taken so little to ease her mind.

She heaved a sigh, glad that Eva did not have to worry about her anymore. Then she became aware of what was to come next.

The air grew thick with awkwardness, and her mortification returned as she rose to her feet.

She looked everywhere else but at him, not knowing what to say. Eventually, she croaked, “I am sorry. I do not know what

came over me. This has never happened before, and it will never happen again. I—”

He cut her off. “I know. It is perfectly all right, rest assured. There is no need to apologize, Charlotte. I took no offence.”

She turned to face him, holding his gaze finally.

He did not look angry one bit. In fact, his eyes were smiling at her. It was almost as though he was pleased.

“You are not furious?”

“Not in the very least. The trip we made to London and back was a long one. The first time I went on such a journey, it took its toll. For a day or two, I could not function at full capacity. You have been working so hard lately, Charlotte. Add that to yesterday’s journey, and it is understandable that your body protested and decided to take extra rest for itself. In fact, I am glad you slept in. As you can see, it afforded me more time to

spend with Eva.”

It was just like her dream; the two of them alone, standing facing each other, and he saying words that made her heart flutter, although she did not think this conversation would end the way the one in her dream had ended. Oh goodness, how could she look him straight in the eyes after that?

“Sometimes, my lord, you are such an unbelievable man.”

His smile widened. “I remember making an agreement to address each other informally. Am I to blame your forgetfulness on the chance that you are not yet fully awake?”

He was teasing her, just as he had teased her in her dream. She smiled, finally knowing that all was truly forgiven even though he insisted there was nothing to forgive.

“Nathaniel... Thank you for being so understanding. I do not imagine other

employers are so kind to their servants.”

“You forget yourself again, Charlotte. We are friends, and an important part of friendship is being kind to one another.”

Such wit. It was truly admirable.

“Ah, true. Forgive me, Nathaniel. I suppose my body is still protesting. Seeing as you are so understanding, you would not mind if I took the rest of the day to sleep further, would you?”

“You may take a week if you wish.

Although, I am afraid Eva is truly going to believe you are ill if you choose to remain in bed for that long.”

“Oh, you do have a point. I did not consider that. She was truly worried, was she not?”

“She loves you deeply. It is easy to see why.”

Something in his eyes changed, and she cleared her throat, breaking the contact.

“I love her just as deeply, and for her sake, I shall remain awake, alert, and sharp.”

“And in full control of all your memories,” he teased further.

If only he knew what additional memories she now possessed... Well, that dream was something best kept to herself!

“Certainly.”

“Very well then, I believe we are finished here. I shall leave you to continue your duties while I return to mine. I look forward to seeing you at dinner.”

With those words, he left the solar.

Charlotte remained for a moment longer, wondering how she was expected to keep fighting her growing feelings for this man, when all he did was give her more reasons to

like him.

Later that evening, as Charlotte and Eva left the drawing room after an afternoon of embroidery, Nathaniel came to them.

There was that spring in his step Lady Burke had talked about, and he was evidently still in the cheerful spirits he had been in earlier that afternoon.

Charlotte unknowingly held her breath as he drew closer. It was starting to become a

habit.

“Ladies!” he chimed

“Father,” Eva greeted.

“Nathaniel,” Charlotte followed.

He nodded at them both.

“An idea crossed my mind just now, and I thought to share it with the both of you. There is a castle down in the south of London. A

place of great historical importance. I will not deny that I peeked at this week's lesson schedule, and I saw that you are supposed to study history at some time this week."

Charlotte nodded, wondering where this was leading.

"That is correct."

"Very well, then. Perhaps it would be a good thing to have a more practical lesson?"

“What are you proposing, my lord?” she asked, intrigued.

He tore his gaze away from her to look at Eva.

“Sweetheart, how would you like to go to visit a real castle tomorrow?”

Eva instantly lit up. “A castle? Tomorrow?”

“Yes, a castle, tomorrow.”

“Oh my! That would be wonderful!” Eva turned to look excitedly at Charlotte, tugging the hand she held.

Charlotte was met with adorable eyes opened so wide that she immediately knew she would not be able to deny the child anything.

“Can we go, Lady Willmington? Please, please, please? It will be so much fun, and you heard Father. It would help with our lessons.”

Charlotte made an act of thinking about it for some time, though her mind was already made up.

“In two days,” she announced. “That is the day after tomorrow ... that is agreeable, if your father says so.”

They both turned to Nathaniel, expectant.

“The day after tomorrow? I suppose that

would suit. In fact, it would be perfect. I would hate to trouble you when you are yet to recover from yesterday's journey. The day after tomorrow it is! I shall clear my schedule."

Charlotte smiled then. "And we shall prepare ourselves. Thank you, Nathaniel. This is such a marvelous idea. It will be an interesting lesson, indeed."

She did not know what to expect, but she believed it would be so.

“I am glad you see it that way. Until dinner, then.”

Charlotte bowed slightly. He nodded, and then turned to walk away.

She watched him go, wondering how she would spend another day in a carriage with him.

The entire universe seemed to be working against her.

If this continued, she would never get rid of her feelings for her charge's father.

Oh, dear.

Chapter 16

The day set aside for their history lesson did not come quickly enough. As dawn broke, Nathaniel and his party set out for Peltney Castle.

He was filled with mixed feelings. The last time he had made this journey was four years ago, before ... everything ... had happened. Now here he was, going back to the place that held so many fond memories for him.

There was sadness, but there was also joy that once again he could visit the castle, this time with two young ladies who meant so much to him.

The ride was quiet for the most part, and it was long. Longer than he had remembered. Thankfully, the weather was warm, and they stopped every now and then to stretch their legs and take in the sun.

When there was not silence, Eva and Charlotte chatted away about everything and

nothing. Eva was evidently excited. As for Charlotte, it was hard to tell.

Nathaniel had tried to decipher what her mood was by staring at her every now and then, but there was a constant smile in place that gave nothing away.

Also, she would not meet his gaze. That part did not bother him so much. He was aware that a lot had changed between Charlotte and himself.

She was mostly shy around him, and he was mostly trying to keep his hands by his sides to stop himself from reaching out and touching her hair or caressing her face.

Sometimes, the urge to do so was so overpowering that he had to tuck his hands into his pockets and ball them into fists. That had happened three times already that morning.

At last, the carriage rolled to a stop on the large field that held the ruin which was

Peltney Castle.

Nathaniel got down, then helped the ladies down. Charlotte came first.

His hands tingled sweetly as he held hers.

“Thank you,” she whispered, still refusing to hold his gaze.

For some reason, this new shyness thrilled him. It was obvious that he affected her as much as she affected him. He was

happy to know that he was not alone in whatever was happening between them.

He nodded, “My pleasure.”

She stepped aside then, and he reached for Eva.

As soon as Eva’s feet touched the ground, she broke into a run, dashing towards the crumbling building.

“Eva! Be careful! These are unfamiliar

grounds!” Charlotte cried, breaking into a run to go after her.

Nathan was not far behind.

So focused on Eva was she, that Charlotte did not look ahead carefully enough. She tripped over a stone and began to fall, her hands flailing as she tried to catch herself.

Thankfully, Nathaniel was close enough to reach out. He caught her just in time, breaking her fall.

They remained that way for what seemed like ages, his back arched forward as he held her in his arms. This time, there was no escape. She finally met his gaze.

Her chest rose and fell. He could not tell if she was trying to catch her breath or if their closeness was making her heart beat so quickly.

Slowly, he came to, becoming aware of the audience watching them.

As the realization of the compromising situation they were in dawned upon him, he swiftly straightened up, helping Charlotte to right herself on her feet.

“That was a close call,” he joked, trying to lighten the atmosphere. It had suddenly grown tense and for good reason.

“It feels as though you just saved my life,” Charlotte forced out. “Goodness! I was so certain I was going to land with my face in the

dirt. To think of the injuries I might have sustained! Thank you, Nathaniel, for acting so quickly.”

He shrugged as though it was nothing. That was a lie. His whole body was more alive than it had been in a long time, just from that little contact.

It was something. Something huge.

He looked at her, really looked at her, letting his eyes sweep over her as though he

was searching for signs of injury.

His eyes finally rested on her lips and that urge to touch her came again, stronger than ever before. He could not remember the last time he had wanted to kiss a woman so much.

Holding on to every ounce of strength inside of him, he tore his gaze away from her.

He cleared his throat before speaking.

“You’re welcome. It was the least I could do.

After all, you were going after my daughter. It appears you did not sustain any injuries. I say we all should be more careful from now on.”

She nodded, and he turned to lead the way. Eva had ceased her running, and she now stood a short distance from them, staring at the castle in awe.

When they reached her side, they too halted.

Nathan gazed at the elegant ruin. It was

just as he remembered. Of course, over the years since he was last here, more bricks had fallen off and the vegetation had grown thicker.

Nevertheless, one did not have to look too carefully to see the beauty that Peltney Castle once possessed.

“Beautiful, is it not?” he asked.

It was Charlotte who responded.

“Magnificent. It looks so huge. If it is this

grand now, I wonder how glorious it must have been in its day.”

“My father told me that many came from far and near just to behold its beauty, citizens and foreigners alike. It was abandoned over a century ago and since then ... no one has ever tried to make a home of it. It is simply a piece of history, withstanding the test of time to serve as evidence of one of the greatest love stories the world has ever known. Come, I shall take you around.”

It all began to come back to him as they began their tour. The first time he was here with his father, he had been ten. After that, they had visited several times more.

The last time, he had brought Clara along. He could see all those memories play out before his mind's eye.

Nathaniel could hear his father's voice, feel his presence as he held his hand; hear Clara's laughter, see the happiness in her eyes. He could see himself. How happy and at peace

he had been with the world at those times.

The emotions rose up unbidden,
threatening to clog his throat, but he drew in
the reins, controlling them. When he was
certain that he had quelled them, he spoke.

Charlotte and Eva followed quietly
behind, just close enough to be seen. For their
benefit, Nathan raised his voice as he told the
story.

Everyone deserved to hear it.

“When I was ten, my father came to me one morning and told me we were going on a trip,” he began. “He said we were going to see a castle. I thought it was the grand palace, and I would meet the King.” He paused to chuckle, and Charlotte and Eva smiled. “I did not know what to expect, but wherever I was going with my father, I knew it would be worth it. That was how much I loved and trusted him.”

He came to a stop just as they made the first turn.

“When we arrived here, I was ... well, astonished. It was not what I had been expecting at all. That was twenty years ago, and this castle looked even more beautiful then. So, after I got over my surprise, I was in awe. He took me around, showing me all of these great places that held beautiful memories, and he told me of the amazing story that had been birthed here.”

He looked around at his audience. He saw that he had their attention, so he

continued.

“A long, long time ago, there lived a fearsome man. He was a brute. Very dangerous and well known for his callous ways. His reputation preceded him, far beyond the seas of England. All who knew of him never thought they would see the day when he would change his dangerous ways, and they never imagined the end of his tyranny would come at the hands of a woman.”

“A woman?” Eva asked, curious.

He looked down at her with a smile.

“Yes, my dear, a woman. The tyrant’s name was Valar, and soon he made plans to kidnap a lady. She was the daughter of a very wealthy lord, his only child, and Valar hoped to receive a lot of money for her ransom. However, something that even the tyrant himself never imagined happened. He fell in love with her.”

There were gasps all round, but it was the awe in his daughter’s face that captured

his heart.

“How?”

“Oh, sweetling, the ways of love cannot be explained. She was his captive and he her captor, but their hearts found each other and decided they had found their homes. When Valar realized that he could no longer fight his feelings for the lady, he decided that he would go to her father, apologize for his wrongs, and ask for her hand in marriage. Of course, that was not an easy feat. Her father was happy to

see his daughter again, but when he heard that she had fallen in love with the tyrant, he was mad with fury and disbelief. He would not hear of it! Oh, but his daughter would not leave the tyrant's side, and the tyrant would not let her go. So, her father decided he would give them his blessings in marriage, but only on one condition, that the tyrant proved himself worthy in a one-on-one battle to the death."

He heard a sharp intake of breath beside him, and he turned to see that Charlotte was

entirely mesmerized by his tale. He could imagine she was creating vivid images of these events in her mind.

“So, what happened, Father? Did the tyrant win?”

“All in good time, my love. First, we must see the stables. They are just around the back.”

Nathan smiled, pleased with himself as he heard sighs of protest, but no one said a

word. He continued to take them around, showing them the balcony, the hallway, and the wing where the lady had been kept captive.

Finally, they came to the stables that lay at the back of the building.

“Just beyond this field, there is a lovely sight. It will be the best part of this lesson, you will see,” he declared.

“Now that we have seen the stables, will

you tell us how the story ends, Father? I want to know,” Eva pleaded again.

“I see someone is quite eager. Very well, I shall tell you. But before that ... I brought you to this stable because it is said to have housed the finest and strongest of horses. Valar had the finest of everything, and it was common knowledge that if he won his lady’s hand in marriage, he would have the fairest of maidens.”

Once more, Eva piped, “So did he win?”

He chuckled this time, enjoying Eva's curiosity.

“The lady's father chose his finest warrior to fight Valar. Valar was a strong man, but most of his power came from the men he had around him to protect him. In one-on-one combat and against a knight, one of the finest swordsmen known at the time in England, everyone feared what the outcome would be. If Valar won, the lord might not accept defeat so easily. If Valar lost, his men would go mad

with rage and attack the lady's people. You see, it was not such a simple matter of winning or losing." He paused, and then continued. "They fought long and hard. Both men suffered serious blows. Finally, Valar got the upper hand and just as he was about to make his death strike, he stopped, dropped his sword, and offered his hand to the knight. He refused to kill his opponent. Instead, he showed mercy. It was the first kind act from Valar, and all who were there to witness it were filled with disbelief. The lord knew there and then that Valar was indeed a changed

man. Valar did not prove himself by winning the fight. He proved himself by sparing the knight's life. So, he, too, was knighted. He went from villain to knight. The lord gave his blessings, and Valar returned here to this castle with his bride. They lived happily ever after until their deaths.”

As he finished the story, he waited for everyone to take it in and make of it what they would.

When he looked around, he could tell

that Charlotte and Eva were stunned by his tale but were most especially pleased with how it had ended.

“How wonderful,” Charlotte said, breaking the spell. “It is an amazing story. It sounds like a fairy tale.”

“But it is not. It did happen. That is what makes it such an important part of history. You would not find it in your lesson books. I know. I have checked.”

She smiled at him, understanding that he had done this for Eva.

“What about their children, Father?”

He returned his gaze to his daughter.

“Sadly, they did not have any. The lady, Lady Catherine was her name, could not have children, but that never affected Valar’s love for her. Legend has it they enjoyed every day they spent together in love, and when they were old and grey, they died in each other’s arms. No one could continue Valar’s legacy; no

one could protect Peltney Castle the way that he had. After he was gone, a war broke out among his men over his properties, and those who survived fled with what they could take, disappearing to where they would never be found, to start life anew.”

“When I grow older, I am going to bring my children here and tell them this story. Thank you, Father. This is the best lesson I have ever had.”

He took her in his arms as she reached

for him, wrapping her in an embrace. He always cherished moments like this. It was as though they were slowly regaining all the time they had lost, those three years they were apart.

They soon broke apart, and the moment Eva was back on her feet, she started to run in the direction where Nathaniel had pointed earlier. She wanted to see what lay beyond the fields.

This time, he followed her first, reaching

her just in time to stop her. When they caught up with Eva, they walked in silence.

He knew that they were all wondering what they would see, and he held his peace. What lay beyond was best experienced, not heard.

Finally, they came to the end of the field, and that was when they saw it. The sea.

“Oh my! It is so beautiful!” Eva chimed.

“Breathtaking,” Charlotte whispered, for his ears only.

Whatever sadness or nostalgia Nathaniel had been feeling faded away then. Although he had stood at this point so many times before, this time it felt completely new.

His daughter was in his arms, and a woman he was starting to care deeply about was by his side. Whatever happened after today, he would cherish this memory forever.

Chapter 17

Upon Nathaniel's suggestion, they set up a picnic by the sea and settled down to eat.

The meal was held in silence, save for tricks from Eva that made everyone laugh. As they dined, Charlotte could not help staring at this man who never ceased to amaze her.

Again, he had shown a side of himself that she had not known existed. A tutor, and now, such a wonderful storyteller. Not to mention, he had the voice for it.

She had been so entranced, listening to him tell the story, especially after speaking of how his father had brought him here when he was much younger.

Nathaniel had a wonderful childhood. That much was easy to tell. A father that had been involved with his upbringing and a mother that loved him more than her own life.

He had had one of them until he was older and had begun his own family. The

other was still by his side.

A part of her wished she could say the same for herself.

Alas, the only memories she had of sharing such beautiful moments with her parents ended when she was fourteen. Still, there was no envy in her heart.

Just wishful thinking and gladness for Nathaniel, especially now that he was finally the father that Eva deserved and needed him

to be.

As he told the tale, Charlotte had seen all the emotions play across his face with the rise and fall of his voice. It had been so easy to conjure up images in her head and imagine what it had been like in those times.

A wonderful story, and so beautifully told.

The day could not have gone better, and now she watched with her heart full of joy as

he fed Eva and she fed him in return.

A duke. He was the strangest duke she had ever met.

The strangest and most wholesome. Now she understood why Clara had stood no chance against his charm.

Charlotte wondered how many more wonderful sides there were to Nathaniel Burke, and how much longer she could keep herself from falling completely in love with

him.

Without warning, he looked up and caught her staring. She immediately turned her head, but it was too late.

Had he seen the look in her eyes? The adoration? The admiration? The feelings?

Goodness.

It would not do for him to find out about her feelings, when she did not yet know where

she stood with him.

For the rest of the time they spent at Peltney Castle, she took great care to avoid his gaze as she had done all morning.

The sea held her attention for most of the time, and it occurred to her how peaceful it felt here, how beautiful the scenery was, and how very much like a family they seemed.

All too soon, it was time to leave. One could tell from the countenance of everyone

that this was a trip they were all glad they had taken.

Hours later, Eva lay asleep in Charlotte's lap in the carriage. Charlotte had a protective arm thrown over the little girl to keep her from being jostled as the wheels rolled up and down the rough terrains.

“You know, they say that one often sleeps so peacefully around people they trust completely. It would appear my daughter not only loves you, but she trusts you, as well.”

It had been so quiet, but now the silence was gone, thanks to Nathaniel. Still avoiding his gaze, Charlotte responded.

“You and the duchess first trusted me by putting her in my care. I suppose that was enough conviction for her.”

“It was not enough conviction with the other governesses.”

Well, that was true. Tongue-tied, she said

nothing.

“I am so glad we made this trip today. I know I should have consulted you first before announcing it to Eva. But the idea just came to me, and I could not keep it in. I believed it would be a good experience for all of us.”

Sighing, she finally held his gaze. “There is no need for apologies, Nathaniel. I am glad also that we made the trip. It was a good experience for us all. I have read so many books but have never heard of Peltney or the

tyrant-turned knight until today. We both enjoyed the story very much, and the castle was a sight to behold. Not to mention that it enabled you and Eva to bond with each other even more. If any such trips come to mind again, please, do not hesitate to tell us. We shall be happy to go anywhere with you. Eva trusts you just as much as you trusted your father.”

“And do you? Trust me, that is.”

That question took her aback. She said

nothing, giving it some thought. It had never occurred to her, so it was not something she had ever considered.

However, now that she did, she made a startling realization.

“It appears I do. I trust you, Nathaniel. Not just because I know you would never harm your child, but because I have come to know the kind of man you are in these past months. You protect everyone in your care. As a member of your household staff, I happen to

belong in that class.”

“And is that all you think there is to it?

That I would protect you only because you are a member of my household staff?”

She faltered but quickly found herself.

“Well, there is that, and the matter of being friends, as well. One other important part of friendship is protecting one another, is that not so? That comes with trust, I suppose.”

He smiled then, a slow, heart-melting

smile, and she felt herself swoon.

“I am happy to see that *this* trip has not affected your memories, *Lady Willmington*.”

She raised her brow, smiling as well.

“Ah, indeed. Although, it would appear it has affected yours.”

He broke into laughter then, a sound so rich that she knew she could listen to it for a lifetime and never tire of it.

“You are such a good sport,” he said
amid the laughter. Then, he recovered,
sobering up.

“Charlotte, you are the best friend and
governess a child such as Eva could ever have.
I know I have said this many times before, and
I shall say it again. You are a blessing to us.”

Emotions rose in her throat and tears
rushed to her eyes. It took great will to push
all of them back.

“My life has been blessed as well,” she managed to say.

The spell was cast again, but it did not last so long this time. Charlotte found she wanted to keep speaking with Nathaniel to make the most of times like this.

“I listened as you talked about your father. Lady Burke told me what a wonderful husband he was. He was a great father, as well, evidently.”

A sad smile took over Nathan's features, and she wished she had not raised such a sore subject, although he did not seem to have taken offense.

“He was the very best. He taught me what it is to be a man. He was always so busy as a duke, running the family businesses, the estates... Still, he always had time for me.

Many English men leave the raising of children to their wives and nurses. My father was not that kind of man. He took his time to raise me properly, and for that I will eternally

be grateful to him.”

“You must miss him.”

“Very much. He always gave sound counsel. He was always so strong. There are still some days when I find myself feeling confused and lost, but then I just remember his words. I reach for his presence and feel it. Then I know I am not alone, and the path to take suddenly becomes clear.”

“That is most touching.”

“I suppose it is. What about you? I know your relationship with your father is not that rosy—”

“It was not always that way,” she cut in. “Growing up, when Mother was still with us, he was always loving and affectionate. He, too, was a busy man, but he tried to be as present as he could be. When mother died, he just ... he would not be bothered anymore. We have only spoken a handful of words to each other in ten years. It is a sad thing, really. My

mother, I do not have so many memories of her. She left too early. All I know is that she was an angel. Like sunlight after a dark, stormy night. She was always so happy, so cheerful, so warm. She would brush our hair and tutor us herself. She taught us how to ride horses, how to be proper ladies. She loved us so much that we could feel it in her every word and deed. I still remember what she looked like. I hope I never forget. I do not think I could bear it.”

The tears flowed, and she made no

attempt to stop them. Then, she felt something, and looked to see that Nathaniel had reached across and was now holding her free hand in his.

Strength and comfort. That was what he offered her, and she took it gladly. When she dared hold his gaze, she saw even more. That he was with her, that he understood her pain, that he was there to support her, whatever.

That was when Charlotte realized that her heart was in more danger than she had

thought because, in that moment, she took the first step off the cliff and began to fall for him.

“Eva mentioned that you told her about her mother being an angel. I believe your mother is, as well, and even in this moment, she is with you, watching over you. She lives on, Charlotte, in your heart. As for your father, there is time yet to mend the rift. I am happy to help in any way you will permit. You have brought my daughter and me back together. I would very much like to return the favor.”

How could she refuse?

“Thank you, Nathaniel. Really.” She dragged in a shaky breath, heaving a deep sigh of relief. “That would be wonderful.”

He nodded, squeezed her hand once more, then let her go, relaxing back into his seat.

No more words were spoken. None were needed.

By the time they arrived at the manor, the skies had gone dark, and the moon and stars had come out in all their glory.

Eva had awakened at some point during the ride, but she went back to sleep, eventually.

As they got down from the carriage, she stirred awake again. Nathaniel took her into his arms, and Charlotte followed as he led the way to his daughter's chamber.

When they reached it, Charlotte announced, “Eva, sweetling, you must wash before bed up. Can you stay awake long enough for that?”

“No!” the little girl protested sleepily. “I want to go to bed!”

“What about dinner, sweetheart? Surely, you must be hungry. Don’t you want some food? Just a little?” Nathan asked.

“I just want to go to sleep. I am so tired

... so tired...”

Her eyes closed as she murmured the last word.

Charlotte and Nathan turned to each other. As though planned, they shrugged at the same time. That made them smile.

Turning around, Nathan proceeded to lay Eva carefully upon her bed.

“She at least needs to change out of those

clothes,” Nathan whispered, not wanting to disturb the child.

Charlotte could not agree more. “Let me see to it. Never worry.”

He nodded, then leaned down to place an affectionate kiss on Eva’s forehead. As he rose, he faced Charlotte again.

“Thank you, Charlotte, for everything.”

“You keep saying that, and I might just

start to believe I am doing all this for no wages.”

Charlotte spied the smile tugging at his lips as he turned to leave. When she heard the door close behind him, she got to work.

Careful not to wake her up, she peeled off the dress Eva had worn for the trip. Then, with a towel and a bowl of warm water, she washed her as clean as she could afford to. Afterwards, she slipped a night dress over her head.

Eva must have been very tired, for she did not rouse through any of it. She was already fast asleep.

When Charlotte finally drew the covers up to the child's chin, she breathed a sigh of relief. She stood for a long moment, looking down at the child who had stolen her heart completely.

She did not mind the maid in the chamber at all. Eva had her full attention.

Lady Burke had asked her all those weeks ago if she saw Eva as hers. Charlotte had not known what answer to give, so she had not answered the question directly.

Now, she knew. If Eva had been born of her womb, she could not love her any more than she already did. The child had come to mean more to Charlotte than she could ever have imagined or planned for.

She would give her life for Eva in a

heartbeat, if only to keep her safe.

Such was a mother's love.

She patted the wild dark waves that were the child's hair, feeling her chest expand with all the love and warmth she felt. Eventually, she stopped fighting the urge to kiss the child.

Leaning in, she placed a soft, lingering kiss on that dimple she so much adored.

Then, with a soft caress, she whispered,

“Dream sweet.” Then, she turned and left the room.

She stopped short as she stepped out of the room to find a figure just outside the door. The woody scent peculiar to Nathaniel told her who it was before her eyes did.

“Oh my, you gave me a fright! I did not know you were still here.”

“Forgive me. I could not bring myself to leave, so I decided I would wait for you and

see you to your chamber when you were done.

How is she?”

“Sleeping like a log. I managed to change her out of her clothes, wash her, and put on a night dress. She did not bat an eye through it all.”

He sighed, evidently relieved.

“I do not know how we managed before you came, Charlotte. I simply cannot imagine it.”

As always, she was touched by his words.
She said nothing, she simply nodded.

Together, they started to walk towards
her chambers. They all slept in the same wing.
There were all of seven rooms in this wing.
She had one, Eva had one, Lady Burke had
one, and Nathan had his.

Her chamber was three rooms away from
Nathan's. She did not even know what his
doors looked like after all these months here,

not that she was curious.

“Have you decided when you will be going to see your sister?”

“Oh yes. In three weeks’ time. I was going to tell you soon.”

“That is well. Whatever you need, please, do not hesitate to ask.”

“I won’t. Thank you.”

Finally, they reached her door and came to a stop.

“I had such a lovely time today.”

The butterflies returned, causing a ruckus inside her.

“As did I.”

“I am very glad. Sweet dreams,
Charlotte.”

“You too. Good night.”

With those words, she opened the door and stepped into her chambers. As she closed the door behind her, she rested against it, teaching herself to breathe again.

She could have stayed there for an hour or more. She had no inkling how much time went by. All she knew was that it was ages after that she finally heard the footsteps walking away.

Chapter 18

“Lady Willmington, look what I found! It is a shiny little rock!” Eva chimed, coming to a stop.

Charlotte grinned at the little girl, forced to halt as well. “Oh, it is quite beautiful. Would you like to keep it?”

Eva nodded. “I am going to place it in my shelf. It would make a nice addition.”

“I agree.”

Charlotte was glad that Eva was starting to discover more things that she liked. It was one of the telling signs that she was a happy child.

Lately, whenever they stepped out of the house, the child kept her eyes out for shiny stones like the one in her hand. She now had a shelf where she kept them on exhibit.

Thinking of it, Charlotte decided that it was perhaps time to make another trip. This

time to the museum. The visit to the laboratory was set to happen in two days.

After that, she would speak with Nathaniel, and the trip to the museum would be arranged. Eva loved learning when it was not in the solar. She loved the outdoors, to see things and feel them for herself.

Now that Charlotte knew this for certain, she would use that information well.

“Thank you, Lady Willmington!”

Charlotte stroked the girl's hair affectionately, her smile as warm as the sun. Then, they resumed walking.

“She adores you,” Lady Burke said.

Charlotte turned to her other side. Of course, she had not forgotten that the duchess was by her side. They had all decided to come to the park for a walk.

Lady Burke had been away for some

time, handling matters at their home in Wimsley. Now that she was back, she wanted to spend as much time with Charlotte and her granddaughter as she could.

“I adore her, also. She is such a precious child.”

“That she is. I feel as though I have missed so much since I was away. I heard you went to Peltney Castle?”

“Yes, my lady. Just two days ago.”

“Ah ... it is such a special place for our family, particularly Nathaniel. It holds many fond memories. He has not been there in years, you know? Not since Clara.”

“I heard.”

Lady Burke turned to her then, a small smile on her face.

“Nathaniel is finally recovering. I can see it. Since the last time we talked, his

countenance has improved remarkably. I returned yesterday, and I could easily see that. He has been smiling a lot more, the kind of smile that reaches his eyes. For a mother who has seen her child sad for so long, you have no inkling how much that means to me.”

“Perhaps not, but a part of me can understand. When I first met Eva all those months ago, my heart ached for her. Now, she is the brightest ray of sunshine in my life.”

From the side of her eyes, Charlotte saw

Lady Burke give a knowing smile.

“Ah, finally you admit you see her as yours.”

Charlotte knew then that she had been caught, and there was no way to deny it. So, she accepted it.

“Indeed, I do. It’s impossible not to. She brings so much love and joy to my heart. I do not think I could care for my own child any more than I cherish her.”

“If I died today, I would die a happy woman knowing that I finally did right by my son and grandchild, and that they are in good hands. Your hands.”

Warmth filled Charlotte’s cheeks, and she was at a loss as to what to make of Lady Burke’s words.

“I ... I do not know what to say.”

“You may say nothing. Your deeds speak

loudly enough for you. So, Peltney Castle, eh?

How was the experience?”

Charlotte chuckled. “Grand! I did not realize the duke was such a great storyteller. The tale that lives in those walls is beautiful. As Nathaniel spoke, it felt as though I was taken back in time and watching it all happen before my eyes.”

“Truly? I am glad to hear that. You are special to him, Lady Willmington. He only takes people who are special to him to the

castle.”

“I believe it was Eva he took. I simply had the blessing to accompany them as her governess.”

It was Lady Burke’s time to chuckle. “You really believe that?”

Charlotte would have lied, but the woman looked her in the eye then as if daring her to do so. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

“It is well, Charlotte. It is perfectly fine if it feels too soon to admit it aloud. But you must know, you mean a great deal to us.”

“The feelings are returned, Your Grace. I assure you. You all have been so wonderful to me. Especially Nathaniel. I cannot imagine working for a better man.”

As she finished, Eva, who had seemed quite uninterested in their conversation, looked up at her governess.

“You know something, Lady
Willmington?”

“No, Eva. Tell me, what is it?”

“I think that it would be really grand if
you married my father and became my
mother!”

Charlotte’s heart stopped, causing her
feet to do the same. Her eyes widened as her
head began to reel. Had Eva truly just said

that?

“Eva! Marry? How ... who ... oh dear!”

She could hear Lady Burke snickering beside her. She suddenly found herself completely tongue-tied. She did not know what to feel or what to say.

What did an eight-year-old know about marriage? What had she seen? Even Charlotte had not dared to consider the possibility because she had known it was too sweet a

dream, which, in truth, was all it ever could ever be.

So, she had refused to torture herself with it, not when that other dream still plagued her memories.

“You love me, do you not?” Eva asked again.

“Absolutely. With all of my heart.”

“And I love you with all of mine. I see

the way Father looks at you and talks with you. I think he loves you, as well...”

Charlotte’s jaw dropped, and her heart began to thud heavily against her ribs. She feared she would suffer a bruising. She was tempted to ask what Eva knew about love, but she had just agreed to loving the child.

“Eva, I am your governess. I cannot become your mother or your father’s wife. Beyond that, there are different kinds of love, my dear. Like the kind that exists between you

and me, and the kind that must exist between husband and wife. Your father and I do not share that kind. We simply admire and respect each other.”

Eva seemed to think about that for a while. After a moment, she shrugged.

“Lords marry their governesses. I have heard of such tales, so I do not think it is impossible or improper. As for a special kind of love, I think it already exists. Oh well, if you insist not, I suppose that I must be

wrong.”

Eva did not wait for a response. She was immediately distracted by a butterfly and skipped off, running after it.

Charlotte watched her go, her face heated from her blush. Lady Burke had witnessed it all, and now she did not know how to face the woman.

“Children, eh? They do have wild imaginations, don’t they?”

A measure of relief washed over Charlotte, and she managed to breathe, forcing a chuckle.

“Ah ... you can say that again. Goodness. I wonder where she heard such tales. Love between me and Nathaniel?” she scoffed. “Impossible.”

“Is it though? Children might have wild imaginations, but they are also very keen on observation. Eva must have seen something to

make her believe there is something to it. I cannot say she is the only one who has noticed, either. Anyway, it is such fine weather today. I sense a storm coming, though. Long before night's fall. We had best be returning to the manor soon."

That was it. No more words were said on the matter. They stayed another hour in the park, talking about everything else but Eva's plans for them. Eventually, they got into the carriage and returned home.

As soon as they arrived, the storm started. Eva was sent up to her room. Lady Burke retired to her chambers, and, as Charlotte proceeded to do the same, Nathaniel appeared in the hallway, stopping her.

“Charlotte! I am very glad you all made it back in time. When the skies began to darken, I feared you would not.”

The house had gone dark from the weather change, but she could still see him, feel him.

He was so handsome. It had to be a sin.

She took in deep breaths, willing her chest to open up. It suddenly felt so tight.

Forcing a smile, she answered. “My lord,” she bowed her head slightly. “You forget, your mother can smell a storm from two days away. Thanks to her gifts, we were able to leave the park in time to arrive home safe and sound.”

“Ah, indeed. Her gift does come in

handy. I see everyone has retired to their chambers to wait out the storm. How about you?”

“I was thinking of doing the same.”

“Hmm. So, you would not like a game of chess? I rather enjoyed the one we had last night. I thought we could have another to pass the time.”

She raised her brows. He wanted to spend more time with her? Deciding to tease,

she spoke. “I would enjoy that. That is, if you do not mind losing to a woman again.”

He laughed then. Sweet, smooth laughter that just flowed through her ears.

“Only fair, I suppose. Well, I must let you know that I have learned from last night’s mistakes and hope to make certain they are not repeated.”

“So, you are confident in winning this time around?”

“All I can say is, we shall see.”

Challenged and reveling in the feeling,
Charlotte raised her chin.

“Very well, then. In that case, I suppose I
shall be happy to add another point to my
name.”

His response was a slow, wide grin that
made her heart flutter.

“I was hoping you would say that.”

About an hour later, Charlotte sat in Nathaniel’s study, staring pensively at the chessboard.

She had been doing well so far and could not afford to make any mistakes. Her next move had to be right, perfect.

“So, you want us to visit a museum?”

Charlotte nodded, barely noting his

words. They had been keeping up with light conversation since the game started, but she knew he was merely trying to distract her.

Finally, she saw a perfect play. In her mind, she played out the next possible moves. Satisfied by the outcome, she did the knight fork, attacking the king and another enemy piece.

She caught Nathan's smile as she did so, and was all the more convinced that he did not truly care about winning. He had just

wanted an excuse to spend more time with her.

Charlotte could tell that he was good at chess and putting in effort, but it was more for leisure than competition. Well, she loved winning and his company, so she would take both.

Above all, she was impressed that he was so graceful with losing. Very few men were.

“I believe Eva would be happy to go. She

collects rocks these days. Did you know that?”

Nathaniel nodded. “I have seen her shelf. She might be well on the way to having her own small museum in her chambers.”

“Precisely. I have considered that a visit to the museum would be both educative and enlightening. It might also give her ideas about more things she would like to collect.”

He made his own chess move, then. Charlotte smiled as she saw it. It was just as

she had planned in her head.

Easily knowing the next move to make,
she played her turn.

This time, his smile was filled with pride.

“I think it is an excellent idea. When do
you plan to make the trip?”

“A week from now. We are to visit the
laboratory in two days. Would you like to
come along?”

“The laboratory? Ah yes. Well, no. Peter shall accompany you two, and I trust him. You are in safe hands. His presence is as good as mine.”

Charlotte did not share such sentiments, but she kept it to herself. She had really hoped that Nathaniel would decide to come along. There was just something about Lord Kinsley that made her uncomfortable.

Well, if Nathan trusted him so much,

then she must learn to, as well. Besides, Eva would be with them, so she need not be alone with him.

“In a week’s time sounds perfect. For that trip, I shall accompany you two. Perhaps Mother would like to join us, as well? She would not let my ears rest about how much she missed London.”

“Really? But she only returned from Wimsley yesterday.”

Nathaniel sighed. “Precisely. In such little time, she had managed to fill my ears.”

“Well, the more the merrier!”

With those words, she made her winning move. As the piece fell into place, she announced, “Checkmate.”

Nathan laughed. It was a happy, genuine laugh.

“Oh, would you look at that. You win,

again.”

“Only because you are not playing to win,” she replied, smirking.

“Lady Willmington! You shock me. Oh well, I am simply having fun, but rest assured, I am giving it my best. I would not insult you by playing to lose just so you can win. That would not be a win, not truly. You are skilled with this game. You know your way around the board, and that’s commendable, as is everything about you.”

“There you go again with your sweet words.”

“None of which are false, might I add.”

Her lips stretched into a smile, and she relaxed in her chair to look at him, stare into his eyes. The day was beginning to brighten again, as the storm had ceased its raging.

She could see him even more clearly, and his smile did reach his eyes.

“How would you like to celebrate your win? Shall we go to see another play? Just the two of us this time.” His voice was soft, endearing, and the way he was looking back at her...

Her heart paused, and Charlotte knew it there and then. She was in love.

“That sounds lovely.”

Chapter 19

Nathaniel sighed in frustration as he pulled out the seventh drawer. He had been almost certain of where he had placed his pocket watch. Now, he was not so sure anymore.

He had searched everywhere he could think of and was near his wit's end. This particular drawer he had not opened in years. The pocket watch could not possibly be there, but he had to check just to be certain.

The last time he had held it was a week ago. He could not remember asking any of the servants to keep it safe. So where could it have gone?

His eyes sharp, he looked around the drawer for any sign of it. His hand roamed as well, hoping to have the watch in his grasp soon.

That did not happen; however, he found something. A book.

“That is strange,” he thought, as he grabbed the book and straightened up. He could not remember putting any book in the drawer.

He stepped away from the shelf to get some light from the window. A closer look easily told him what it was. A diary.

Since he did not keep any diary, he knew right away whose it was. A pain stabbed through his heart, and the kind of grief he had not felt in weeks rose, threatening to

overwhelm him.

He considered putting the diary away, not wanting to be reminded further of her. The memories could be painful sometimes, especially now that he felt he was truly healing.

Still, he could not bring himself to put it away. So, bracing for what was to come, he found a chair, sat, and opened the diary.

The second wave of nostalgia came as he

glimpsed her delicate strokes. She had been such an intelligent and dedicated writer. It was one of her hobbies.

Many times, he had teased her about writing a book. Occasionally, she would jest in return, saying she might, but she never managed to do so. Death did not give her that chance.

He released a ragged breath he did not even know he had been holding as he began to flip through the pages. Eventually, he got to

the last.

A look at the entry date told him that she had stopped writing in this book a month before her demise. That was when her illness had really taken over.

Again, Nathaniel sighed. This time in pain.

He had not even been aware that Clara had kept a diary. Why was he only finding out now? Why had this book not been seen when

he had asked the maid to gather her belongings and put them aside, so that he would not have to see them whenever he went in search of his?

Whatever he had planned for the day no longer seemed to matter, not even his pocket watch. Anything else could wait. Unable to resist the urge, he started to read.

Two hours later, Nathan was still sitting on the chair, turning pages.

Tears had flowed, stopped, and flowed again. Reading her words made him feel so close to her, made him feel her presence. It was as though she never left. As though she was still alive, there with him.

Seeing her world through her eyes, how happy she had been as his wife and mother to Eva. It was all too much for him. Too much. She painted such a beautiful life. She had been happy. Their home had been blessed.

Not that she had never shared these

thoughts with him. Oh, she had. But not this way, not so wonderfully told.

He took in a deep breath, getting a hold on himself for the hundredth time since he started reading. When he was certain he could continue, he flipped on to the next page.

Dear Diary,

Something amazing happened today. Eva learned how to brush her hair! It was such a sweet, precious moment. You may remember how

she has been making a fuss over wanting to hold the comb herself, and how she never seems to get it right. Well, my baby did just that today.

Oh, you should have seen the look on her face. I have never been so proud as a mother. She is so precious, and I love her with all my heart.

Nathaniel is away at Wimsley but will return soon. I cannot wait to tell him all about it. I am certain Eva is quite eager to show her father her new skills, herself.

*What is this life? How did I become so
blessed? Well, until another time. Goodbye,
Diary.*

Nathaniel smiled as he finished reading that entry. He remembered returning from Wimsley only three days later. Clara could not wait to break the news, and Eva had been too happy to demonstrate for him.

Their family had been perfect, happy.

He kept on reading until, finally, he

reached a page whose contents chilled the marrow of his bones. It read,

Dear Diary,

Something strange happened today. I visited the bookshop to purchase some new books for my library, and I was accosted by a strange man.

He was well-dressed and looked to be gentry. He was also very proper and had nice manners. I had never seen him before today, but it was clear that he knew my person very well.

He knew my name, my husband, and my daughter. Indeed, he was not offensive or anything of the sort. I did not think I was in any harm, but it made me so uncomfortable to learn that a stranger knew so much about me.

What was even more frightening was the message he had for me. He claims that someone close to my family has ill intentions towards us. He asked that I be careful, that this someone is a threat to the happiness which my family and I presently enjoy.

I do not know what to make of this, whether to tell Nathaniel or not. How would he take it? Perhaps, it was simply a prank made to put me on edge.

Who knows? Any time now, he might return and announce that he had only been up to no good with his jest. Ah, that must be it. I must not worry.

Nathaniel and I do not have many friends, and, as much as people cannot entirely be trusted,

I believe I can say that no one close to us would dare conceive such thoughts, much more carry out plans to harm us.

Nevertheless, it would not hurt to be a little more cautious. Ah, that it would not. I shall wait and see if this man shall come to me again.

If he does a third time, then I shall inform Nathaniel.

Oh well, that is all for today. I must go now. Until another time.

Goodbye, Diary.

A chill went through Nathaniel as he finished reading Clara's disturbing account. Quickly, he skimmed through the remaining pages to see if Clara had written anything more about the strange man.

It seemed she had not.

But that did nothing to calm him. It only worried him more, as there were only four

other entries after that.

Something gnawed at his mind like a forgotten memory pushing to break through. He remained still and tried to let it in, wondering what it could be.

Finally, it came.

Ah yes. On the day of Clara's funeral, a man had walked up to him.

What had he called himself? Mr.

Benjamin, was it? Bradley? Gerald?

Three years seemed such a long time ago, and some part of Nathaniel's mind had tried to put away that painful memory. What had his name been again?

Suddenly, Nathaniel remembered.

Gregory Brighton. Of course! Mr. Brighton! He had claimed to be a friend of Clara's and had given Nathaniel the same warning that Clara had recorded in her diary.

That his family was in danger.

Nathaniel, like Clara, had considered the possibility that the man had simply been up to no good. Now, thinking of it, he was forced to reconsider.

What if Mr. Brighton had indeed been up to something? Was it possible? What kind of a man played such a prank on a grieving husband?

Still, if Mr. Brighton had been right, then surely something should have happened in the time since then. The past three years had been awfully quiet, with no incidents occurring that seemed connected to Mr. Brighton's strange warning.

Nathaniel had never once felt threatened or in danger. What could it all mean?

Would it be foolish of him to dismiss it? Yes, he decided. Rather, it would be wise to consider it seriously.

Indeed, there had been nothing in Clara's diary to hint that she had felt that she was in danger at any point. Still, what if there were something in this diary?

Something worth pursuing? Could he live with himself knowing that he had done nothing to make certain?

This man had approached Clara only two months before her death. The idea forced Nathaniel to consider many possibilities.

Was it truly a coincidence that Clara had lost her life to a 'flu shortly after the warning? Yes, she had been frail in health, and the 'flu had shaken her badly.

Still, if there was a possibility, even the slightest, that someone could have been responsible in some way for her death, he owed it to Clara to find out. To be sure.

He closed the diary, then, aware that he could not read any more, not today. He was

sad. Deeply sad.

Worry and guilt ate at him at the thought that he might not have done all he could to save Clara, to protect her. That he had failed her, and only three years after losing her, thoughts of her were beginning to grow more distant from his heart.

Day by day, another woman took up that space, filling his mind, making him think thoughts that belonged in fairy tales.

It was not fair. He had promised to love Clara till his last breath, and he must continue to do so. To honor her memory in death and keep his promise.

That was necessary. He would no longer allow himself to be carried away. He would find Mr. Brighton and see if the gentleman had any more to say.

He should have listened three years earlier, and he hoped he was not too late, for now he was ready to listen.

With this in mind, he rose to his feet and left his chambers, all thoughts of finding his pocket watch forgotten.

Chapter 20

Summer would be over soon and when winter came, there would be no more walks in the park with the sun shining down on them.

Charlotte loved every season, yet she found herself wishing summer would last a little while longer. The five days that she and had Eva spent in the solar taking lessons passed by quickly, with their visits to the park to look forward to.

They would not be able to make visits as

often once it got really cold. Although thinking of their trip to the museum and how thoroughly everyone had enjoyed it, she supposed they could still find a way to entertain themselves and have some fun.

She looked at the little girl skipping in glee beside her, and her chest warmed. That day, they visited the park, with no company. It felt nice to get to spend this time alone with Eva. It helped strengthen their bond.

“Is it going to rain today, Lady

Willmington?”

Charlotte looked up at the clouds. She had never been able to tell. She wondered how Lady Burke did it.

“I cannot say, sweetheart, but we will see. Anyhow, I will make sure we arrive home safe and sound before it begins to pour.”

Satisfied by that answer, Eva nodded and continued to skip. Charlotte kept her eyes trained on the child, aware that Eva was prone

to running off these days, when she felt no one was looking.

As they turned a corner and stepped into the fenced area, a hand suddenly clamped around Charlotte's wrist.

She startled, fear filling her as she came to a halt. Her eyes flew to the hand on her wrist before she turned to look at who had stopped her.

It was a man she had never seen before,

and although he did not look fearsome to her, her fright only heightened.

The man must have sensed it for he immediately let go of her hand.

“Pardon my manners, my lady. I am sorry I gave you a scare. I did not mean to. I simply needed to catch your attention.”

“Who are you?” she asked, breathless.

“Someone who feels obligated to care

about your safety and give you a much-needed warning, Lady Willmington.”

He knew her name.

“How do you know who I am?”

“They say it is a small world, my lady.
England is just a tiny part of that world.”

She opened her mouth, but no words came out. Instead, she swallowed.

“I know you are confused, but you have nothing to fear, not from me. I come in peace. You must know, Lady Willmington, that you are not safe. The household you work for has an enemy, a foe in friend’s clothing. I am afraid they have their eyes set on you. You will do well to be watchful.”

Her breathing grew heavy. “And who is this enemy? Does he have a name or not? Or is it a she?”

The man shook his head. “I am afraid I

cannot tell. I have said all that I can say. Any more would be putting myself in danger, as well. I have already taken great risk revealing myself to you today.”

Charlotte could not understand a thing that was going on. Who was this man? What was he talking about?

“Revealing? Have you been following me?”

He did not deny it. “Yes, for some time

now..." his voice trailed off as he looked away from Charlotte to something behind her.

It was at that moment that she remembered Eva. She turned to look around, but she could not see one trace of the child.

Frantic, her eyes grew wide as she hurriedly scanned the entire park. Thankfully, she caught a glimpse of night-dark hair and sky-blue dress dashing behind a tree.

She sighed in relief and turned back to

excuse herself. As she did so, she found the man was nowhere to be seen. He had gone. Vanished into thin air.

Charlotte would have gone after him, asked him more questions, but there were more pressing matters. She had to find Eva before she lost her for good.

Beyond that, if there was any truth to the man's words, neither she nor Eva were safe.

Picking up her skirts, she went in search

of the little girl, following the path to where she had last seen her.

Of course, Eva was not waiting by the tree when she arrived, but once again, Charlotte caught a glimpse of her. This time, heading to the fountain.

Still weary, she went after her again, reaching her just in time to stop her from falling into the water.

“Eva!” she cried as she caught her and

snatched her away.

Overwhelmed by the high emotions running through her, she hugged Eva tightly before releasing her and putting her on her feet.

“Oh Eva, what shall I do with you? What were you thinking, running off that way? Do you want to make me sick with worry? I have always told you to remain where I can see you, never stray far from my line of sight. Besides, what were you doing climbing on that

fountain? What would have happened if you had fallen into the water and hurt yourself?”

Eva’s face went from happy to sad.

Charlotte could see that she felt truly remorseful.

“I am so sorry, Lady Willmington. Please forgive me. I did not mean to make you worry. I just thought it would be fun to have a chase. Then, I saw the fountain, and I could not wait to go to it. It is so beautiful. I never wanted you to worry, and I do not want you taking

ill.”

The girl might have cried, and Charlotte found that it would break her heart to see those tears. So instead, she took Eva into another warm embrace, wishing she had not scolded the child.

“Oh, my sweet, do not feel bad. I will not actually fall ill, it was just ... it was nothing. I just worry about you so much because I love you, and I cannot bear for any harm to come to you. That is why I need you in my sight

always, where I can make sure that you are safe at all times. Do you understand? Do not feel sad, my dear. There is nothing to be forgiven.”

Eva tried to pull away, and Charlotte let her. Holding her gaze, the child asked, “You mean that?”

“Absolutely.”

“Thank you, Lady Willmington. I am sorry, nonetheless. I will do better from now

on. I love you, too.”

They continued walking, but the conversation with the stranger remained in Charlotte’s mind, disturbing her thoughts. She had half a mind to declare the trip over, so they could return home.

However, after this little incident, she did not want to upset Eva further by asking her to leave. Then, the child would truly believe she was not forgiven.

A bright idea came to Charlotte's mind then, and she grinned, happy at the thought.

“I will tell you what. Since you want a good chase, how about we have one? But remember, you must not run too fast, and you must be careful, so you do not trip and hurt yourself. Can you do that?”

Eva's eyes shone with gladness. “Yes, Lady Willmington!” she chimed.

So smitten with her, Charlotte found

herself chuckling at her enthusiasm.

“All right then. I shall count to three.

Once I do, you start to run. Is that understood?”

Eva nodded.

“Good. I will start. One ... two ... three!”

At the mention of the last word, Eva broke into a run. This time, she was careful, watching her steps and taking great care not

to move too fast.

Charlotte could not deny that she was very impressed. She waited a while to give her a head start then she broke into a small run of her own and went after her.

They stayed in the park for three more hours, playing so many games and having so much fun. The thought of the strange man receded further and further away from her mind, until it was time to return home.

As they settled in the carriage, Charlotte couldn't help wondering whether to tell Nathaniel of the strange man's warning or not. Should she truly take him seriously? Or had it simply been a jest?

After all, she worked in the household of the Duke of Wimsley. It was nearly impossible that people did not know who she was after four months.

The man looked to be in his late twenties perhaps. Too old to be up to such antics.

Perhaps he was just one of those men who refused to grow up and derived joy from upsetting people in such a way.

It might be wise not to dismiss him so easily, though. She would bide her time and see if he would return to her. In the meanwhile, she would heed his words and exercise caution.

If he ever came to her again, then she would speak of it to Nathaniel.

Chapter 21

“Roses are red. Violets make the rainbow
beautiful.

White grow the lilies and the daisies,
pink.

To make a lady smile, give her a flower
as fair as she.

Prove your love to her in thoughts,
words, and deeds.

Soon your lady shall return your love and
then you shall live,

Happy ever after.”

Everyone seated at the dining table
erupted into applause as Eva finished reciting
the poem. She had been learning it all week,
eager to share it with everyone when she was
done memorizing it.

Charlotte looked around the room,
recognizing the looks on the faces. The

twinkling eyes and wide smiles. She supposed she had the same look on her face. After all, she was just as proud.

Nathaniel was the first to speak.

“That was lovely, Eva! You’ve done well. That was beautiful.”

“Your father is right, darling. It was quite meaningful, too. I believe I speak for everyone when I say we are proud of how far you have come,” Lady Burke added.

Nathaniel looked at Charlotte then,
holding her gaze.

“Before you, she could barely read a sentence herself. Speaking, she was excellent at. Now, she can read, memorize, and even recite! Lady Willmington, permit me to raise your wages!”

Charlotte chuckled at that, even as she tried to ignore the tingly feeling inside.

“I am glad you are pleased, my lord. Eva is such a bright child. She learns easily and is a delight to teach. She is a great pupil, and great pupils make their teacher shine. Well done, Eva.”

Eva was beaming. The praises were all true after all.

“Next week, I shall recite another. This time, it shall be a poem written by me. Before then, I have something for you, Father.”

Nathaniel raised his brow in question,
and Eva flourished a daisy from her back.

Charlotte shook her head as she saw it.
She had been wondering what the child was
hiding.

“Lady Willmington loves daisies, Father.
Did you know? Well, as I learned the poem, I
thought it would be lovely for you to give a
flower to Lady Willmington as the poem says.
So here, have one. It’s a pink daisy and just as
fair as she.”

Charlotte's face was suddenly hot. It was as though all the air had gone out of the dining hall, leaving room for only heat.

The silence rang loud in her ears, and she wondered what Nathaniel would do. She had not told him about Eva's marriage plan. Now, she wondered if he would realize that his daughter was up to something.

Oh, this child.

Finally, the silence was broken. Nathaniel reached out to take the flower from Eva. When she dared to steal a glance, she saw that he was smiling.

“Why, thank you, sweetling. This was most thoughtful of you. Lady Willmington?”

She looked up again to see the flower hovering a breath away.

“For you. It is beautiful, but not nearly as you.”

Her cheeks burned from all that heat. Muttering her thanks, she reached out and accepted the flower.

She could not bring herself to hold his gaze, nor the duchess's, for that matter.

When she looked at Eva, she wondered what she would do with the child. There was that wide grin that told her Eva knew exactly what she was doing.

This was not an innocent act. Just then, Eva turned to her grandmother, and they both nodded.

If Charlotte had not been watching carefully, she would have not caught it.

Would you look at that...

She knew what she had seen, and it was now clear that the child was not acting alone. Eva had an accomplice.

Interesting, very. For a moment, Charlotte pondered whether to speak about what she knew to the culprits, but she immediately decided against it.

She would hold her peace, continue to act as if she were oblivious to their schemes, and see what other tricks they had up their sleeves.

Somehow, dinner managed to go on normally after that. No more cards were played, and by the time the evening ended,

that event was almost forgotten.

They all left the dining hall one by one. Charlotte took Eva to her chamber to put her to bed.

As the sweet child lay in bed, covers up to her chin, she looked up at Charlotte and whispered, “Thank you for coming into my life. You make me remember what it is like to have a mother again. Ever since I met you, I do not hurt as much anymore. I still miss Mother, dearly, but now I have Father and I

have you. This makes me happy. I love you, Lady Willmington, so much. Never leave me, please.”

Charlotte’s eyes filled with tears, and a hand squeezed her heart. Bending, she showered Eva’s faces with kisses.

Her life would never remain the same. This child had changed her, and she was only just realizing that, in many ways, caring for Eva had healed many of her wounds that had lay untended for years.

“Oh dear, I will never leave you. Not unless you ask me to. I will be here for you, always.”

“Promise?” Eva asked as she pulled away.

Charlotte did not miss a beat. “I cross my heart!”

Eva’s face melted into a smile, one that Charlotte would hold dearly in her memories

forever.

“I am glad. Goodnight, Lady
Willmington.”

“Goodnight, sweetheart. Sleep well now,
the angels keep watch over you. I love you.”

With one last lingering kiss, Charlotte
turned to leave. By the time she closed the
doors behind her, the child was fast asleep.

She went down the stairs just to make

sure that the doors and windows had all been locked and lights put out. It was a habit she had resumed in the past few days.

As the eldest, it had been her duty back at home. Now that this place was starting to feel like home, she caught herself making these rounds without realizing it.

After ascertaining that all was to rights, she began to return to her chambers. That was when she saw him, at the fireplace, sitting quietly.

She paused. Time seemed to lose meaning as she stood there watching him, contemplating whether to go to him or not.

He looked so lonely, and her heart reached out to him. Eventually, she made the decision.

“Would you mind some company, my lord?” she asked as she reached him.

He shook before turning to look at her,

and she knew that she must have startled him.

“I am sorry. I did not mean to give you a fright. I saw you sitting all alone, and I thought it would be nice to join you. May I?”

He looked as if he was lost in thought and could barely hear her words. Eventually, he glanced at the sofa behind her, then back at her. He nodded.

Sighing, she took her seat and patted her skirts. For a while, nothing was said between

them. Nathan held a book in his hand which he went back to reading, and she focused on how the flames burned.

It was a beautiful sight, but the silence gnawed at her. Something was not right.

Nathan never let a moment with her pass by without making conversation.

Beyond that, he looked troubled.

Against her better judgment, she spoke again.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

It was as though he did not hear her. So, she spoke again.

“Nathaniel?”

He heard her, then. As he looked at her, he carefully closed the book and put it away. She did not know better, so she could not tell if he was trying to hide it.

“Yes?” he asked.

Charlotte felt a sense of sadness creeping in, and she tried to fight it. Why could she not shake off the feeling that something was wrong?

She tried to think back to dinner. He had been polite, but no more. He had not tried to be chatty or warm, merely polite. Why had she not taken notice then?

“Is everything all right? Is anything the

matter?” she asked.

His brow raised as he responded. “What? No, not at all. I was simply caught up in the book I am reading.”

“Oh, and what book is that?”

“Oh? Um ... just some boring old book. Not the kind you like to read. I assure you; you would not enjoy it.”

Charlotte knew a lie when she heard one,

especially coming from him. It made her all the more curious. Why was he lying? What was he hiding?

Playing along, she responded. “Oh, I see. But it must be quite interesting to have you so captivated.”

He forced a small laugh. “I suppose it is my kind.”

“Hmm. So, how was your day?” she asked, changing subjects. If he did not want to

talk about the book, then they could speak of something else.

She did not like this situation one bit.

Everything was just wrong. It was worse than the way that things had been between them when they first met.

“Well, nothing beyond the usual. I visited the village today to speak with some of the people, make certain they were doing well and have no complaints. I shall be going to London in a week to check on our firms there, to make

sure that all is well. It is the same time you are leaving for your sister's, I believe?"

Charlotte nodded. He remembered. Well, that was a relief.

"Good. I shall take Eva along with me. She loved it there the last time we visited. I believe she even made friends. Being around them would help her not to miss you too much," Nathaniel said.

"That sounds like a very good plan,"

Charlotte replied, relieved that Eva would not be spending her time in solitude while she was away.

“I am glad you agree,” came his response.

Where was the warmth? The lingering gazes? The affection-filled eyes? Why was he being so distant? It hurt.

“How could I not? Well, my day was lovely. As you know, Eva and I visited the

park. We had so much fun. In fact, she almost fell into a fountain of water, but I caught her just in time.” Charlotte chuckled, but it was not from her heart.

“That girl never stops amazing me. She is such a ball of energy, and she never stays still.”

He smiled. This one did not reach his eyes at all.

He was not here with her. Where was the

radiance she saw whenever she spoke about Eva? And would they not talk about the flower tonight?

How could she even tell him about the man she had met when he was being this way?

“Have I offended you, sir?” she blurted out. “You seem ... distant.”

That seemed to get his attention. His brow furrowed in confusion. It cleared as he

bowed his head in guilt.

“No, you have not offended me. I’m just in a gloomy mood tonight. You came to keep me company, and I cannot even find it in me to be a good sport. I am sorry, Charlotte. If you do not mind, I should like to take my leave. I think it is time I retired to my chambers.” He rose then, still taking care to keep the book hidden.

“Have Frederick put out the fire when you are ready to leave, will you?”

She nodded, not knowing what to say.

“Very good... Well then, I shall see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, goodnight,” she whispered.

She remained at the fireplace for a long time after he left, worrying about so many things. The man at the park, Nathan and what his recent behavior meant for their friendship, and how it would affect Eva.

She hoped he was well. Whatever it was that was weighing on his mind, she wished he would share it with her, so that she could help to take the pain away.

If she was the problem, if he had suddenly realized the foolishness in having such a close friendship with her, then she hoped with all her heart that, for Eva's sake, he would not begin to avoid her altogether.

Eva needed him. She needed them both.

If they grew apart now, the child would become disappointed and discouraged. There's no telling what it would do to the months of progress they had achieved.

Finally, with a heavy sigh, Charlotte rose to her feet.

As she found the way to her chambers, she could no longer ignore the small voice that kept asking, *Would not your heart break, as well?*

Chapter 22

As soon as Nathaniel arrived in London, he paid a visit to his friend, Mathew, who happened to be an investigator.

After finding the diary, he had wanted to get started on the investigation as quickly as possible, but he had held his peace, biding his time until he arrived in London.

No one knew it, but this was his most important reason for being there. He had been unable to get any rest since he read his wife's

words. He needed to know who Mr. Brighton was, to find him, and speak to him.

Perhaps Mr. Brighton would finally be ready to come clean with the entire truth about what he knew?

“Your Grace, my lord will see you now.”

Torn out of his thoughts, Nathaniel nodded at Mathew’s butler and muttered his thanks.

Then he proceeded into Mathew's study.

The moment Mathew saw him, he rose from his seat, beaming with smiles.

“Burke! What a pleasant surprise! I had thought I would not see you in London until next season. Yet here you are, and in my home, no less!”

Nathaniel smiled as he shook his friend's extended hand.

“Oh, Caughney, I have been visiting

London every other month! I have just been minding my business and keeping my head down, as always. It is why you do not know of my visits.”

“Ah, if anyone knows how to slip in and out of a place without being noticed, it surely is you.”

“In England, that is the only way to lead a life with no rumors or gossip surrounding your name. Once they see too much of you, you come to their minds easily, and they

happily cook up tales to keep the gossip mill running.”

Mathew broke into a hearty laugh.

“I cannot say you are wrong, for every word you have said is the truth. Come, come. We must sit. I believe I have a bottle of brandy somewhere in the cellar. I hope it is not too early in the day for you to drink.”

“No, not at all,” Nathaniel responded.

“Well then, let us fill our bellies, while you tell me what brought you to my home today.”

Nathaniel waited as Mathew went for the bottle. He returned soon enough. After filling their cups, the viscount sat down, too, and the pair fell into easy conversation.

They talked about everything and nothing. Laughing and exchanging counsel.

Nathaniel bided his time, aware that it

would be rude to not exchange pleasantries and stories before stating his business. Finally, Mathew asked again, “So, Nathaniel, will you finally tell me why you are here? I am very glad to see you, as I always will be, but a man such as yourself does not act without purpose. I have known you long enough to know that. Besides, I have spent too many years in the investigating business not to recognize the look of trouble. Something bothers you. Pray tell me what it is, dear friend.”

Nathaniel sighed. This was why he had

come to Mathew. The man had keen eyes and a sharp mind. It was how he had managed to run his investigation business for such a long time and manage to keep it a secret from most of England.

“There is no use trying to keep anything from you, is there?”

Mathew chuckled. “No. Although, I do not think you intend to do so.”

“You are right, my friend. I do not. Here,

I should like you to have a look at this.." He brought out the diary and handed it over to Mathew.

"What is this?" Mathew asked as he received it.

"A diary. It belonged to Clara. I did not know she kept one until I found this a week ago. There is something in there. Go to the marked page. Read what you find."

Mathew did as he was told, and

Nathaniel waited patiently while he read.

When he was done, Mathew looked up at him, eyes wide.

“This is strange.”

“Very, but that is not all. On the day of Clara’s funeral, a man came to me, telling me the same things. I have cause to believe that he is the same person who accosted Clara. Of course, I was in pain, my grief fresh. I chose not to listen to him, dismissing him as

someone who was only trying to worsen my sorrows. Now, I do not know what to think. What if the man was genuine? What if he knows something that would save my family?”

“Nathaniel, this was three years ago. Has anything strange happened since the time since then?”

Nathaniel shook his head. “Not that I can think of.”

“And the man has not made any more

attempts to warn you?”

“I have not heard from him since that day.”

Mathew sighed. “I understand you need to do this just to be certain that all is well. I do not know how easy it will be, but I will try to find this man. Do you know anything about him? Perhaps his name?”

“Gregory Brighton. He is gentry, so you would be looking for a man with no title.”

“Gregory Brighton. Brighton is quite a common name in England. Is there anything more you can remember? Like the color of his eyes? Hair? Height?”

“Gray eyes. Black hair. He is a tall man, almost reaching my ears.”

Mathew nodded. “That description might help. Very well, then, I shall begin the search for him right away. Since there have been no incidents to raise worry or suspicion in the last

three years, I believe there is no cause for fright. Go on with your life as you did before reading this. I shall write to you once I have news.”

For the first time in a week, Nathaniel finally breathed in relief. Mathew’s assurance calmed him, even if only for a short while. If anyone could find Mr. Brighton, it was Mathew.

He would do as the viscount had said. Worry less and wait patiently.

Nathaniel and Eva returned to Wimsley nine days later. By the time he arrived, Charlotte had returned from her sister's and was waiting for them.

It took him back to the day she had first arrived and how the roles had been reversed.

“Lady Willmington!” Eva cried as she set her sights on her governess.

The moment her feet touched the ground,

she broke into a run.

Nathaniel stood watching as his child jumped into the woman's arms and they locked each other in a tight embrace. The first time he had watched such a scene, he had felt a green envy.

Now, all he felt was warmth. So much had happened in such a short time.

As Charlotte and her charge began to talk about how much they had missed each other,

Nathaniel started to walk toward them.

He had missed Charlotte, as well, he realized. Terribly. The week away from her had been so ... strange. Many times, he had woken up expecting to see her at breakfast.

When he heard Eva in the fields, he would stop in the hallway and look out of the window, expecting to see Charlotte playing in the sun with her charge.

Even his mother had felt Charlotte's

absence. But the child had missed her the most. Still, Nathaniel could not remember the last time he had been so happy to see someone.

Before they had parted ways, things had been uncomfortable between them. He knew that that had been his fault. But now, he hoped to make amends.

Given he was still worried about the strange man, and, most days, he was confused by his feelings for Charlotte and what to do about them.

One thing that remained certain was the fact that he enjoyed being around her. He loved it with every fiber of his being, and, in the past week away from her, he had come to realize that he craved her presence, almost more than he did air.

If he did not know better, he would have thought he had fallen in love with her. That could not happen, could it? He had pledged his love to Clara for as long as he lived.

There it was again ... that same
confusion.

Finally, he reached them.

“Someone is thrilled to see you again,”
he started.

She responded with a smile that made his
entire body hum with pleasure.

“I am just as thrilled to see her. I never
thought I would miss everyone and everything

so much. I was sad to learn that you were yet to return when I arrived two days ago.”

“Business kept me for longer than I imagined. You look well. I believe your trip was enjoyable?”

“Absolutely. Mary is showing now, and she is as fit as a fiddle. The midwife believes it will be a girl. Her husband and twin sons are healthy, as well. It was wonderful to spend the whole week with them. Nevertheless, I am so happy to be back home!”

Home... Nathaniel wondered if she realized what she had said. He acted as though he hadn't.

“I am happy to hear that she and her family are well. I am just as glad to have you back home with us. Eva missed you terribly, and Mother would not stop talking about how much she wished you were here with us.”

This made her chuckle. “It pleases me to know that my absence was felt. Welcome

back, everyone.”

They broke into soft chatter as they piled into the house, and Nathaniel decided he would wait for a time when he could speak to Charlotte alone.

That time came the next morning. He joined Eva and Charlotte for tea on the balcony and listened quietly with a smile on his face as Eva chattered on about her time in London.

When she was done, Cecilia called her away for her piano lessons, and it was just he and Charlotte.

“She appears to have had such a grand time in London. I wonder how she even remembered me at all.”

“She never forgot you. Yes, she has become quite the social butterfly and popular among her friends, but even they know of Lady Willmington. Lady Willmington said this, Lady Willmington does that, Lady Willmington

loves that...”

Charlotte broke into laughter at his attempt to mimic Eva’s voice and mannerisms.

He waited, pleased, as she recovered.

“You cannot possibly be serious.”

“Oh, I am. Your name was always on her lips, and, on the nights I put her to bed, she would always ask about you, if you were truly coming back, and express how much she

misses you.”

“I ... I do not know what to say. I could not stop thinking about her, either. Every day that I was away, I wondered what she was doing, if she was well... I almost grew sick with worry. I have always enjoyed spending time with my sisters, but, this time, I was torn between being with that family and cutting my trip short to join this family in London. Did she behave? I hope she did not give you any trouble.”

Nathan could not speak for a moment.

He was so mesmerized by Charlotte and her words.

“No, not at all,” he finally answered. “I learned that Eva has truly become a well-mannered, obedient child. Even in your absence, she behaved herself and shone among her peers. I kept receiving compliments about how intelligent she is and how she is growing into a wonderful young lady. I was both proud and grateful. I would introduce you as the secret next time we visit, but I am afraid I do

not want anyone stealing you away.”

Again, she laughed. This time, it was a soft chuckle.

Her eyes twinkled brilliantly, and he wondered how he could ever deny or fight his feelings for this woman.

She was beyond amazing.

“You will make a great mother, Charlotte. One day.”

She grew sober then, looking away to
hide her pain.

Nathaniel immediately wished he had
not said those words. She might never marry.
The chances of her becoming a mother were
quite slim.

Although, as that thought crossed his
mind, a voice inside of him asked if he truly
believed that; if deep down, when he had said
those words, he had not imagined her cradling

his child in her arms, a child they had both made from love.

“Thank you, Nathaniel. I am happy to hear that Eva caused you no trouble. The duchess once told me that it brings great joy to see one’s child behave well in front of others. I am very proud of Eva.”

“You should be proud of yourself, as well.”

Their gaze locked and held. Every second

that passed felt like an eternity, and the whole world faded away. It was just them. Nathaniel saw no one else.

“I am,” she finally answered, breaking the moment. “I am also glad to see that you are back to your usual self. I was sad to see you grow so distant before we left for our respective destinations. I feared it would affect Eva.”

He thought to behave as though he did not know what she was talking about, but he

could not bring himself to insult her in that way.

“My daughter is my priority. I have had a lot of issues on my mind, and that is the reason I was distracted. Now, I am handling them and hope to do better. I am sorry if I caused you any concern.”

“No, none at all. Although, for a while, I wondered if I was the problem, if I had done you any wrong.”

That took Nathan by surprise.

“Charlotte, you could not do so if you tried. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes. You can do no wrong, not to me, not to this family.”

Her lips stretched into a small smile. “I am glad to hear it. I hope whatever is troubling you gets settled in good time.”

“Thank you. I hope so, too.”

In that moment, he felt an overwhelming urge to tell her, but he resisted it. No, this was his cross to bear. He would not disturb her with events from his past.

He would handle the situation alone. In the meantime, he would also try to make certain that his concerns did not affect his relationship with his daughter or his friendship with this woman.

He did not know what he would do with these growing feelings for Charlotte. As much

as they confused him, he knew he did not really want them gone.

He cherished it, being able to feel again, to laugh again. It made him feel alive after being dead for so long.

He just had to find a way to feel alive without feeling the guilt of betraying Clara's memory.

There had to be a way. He would find one.

Chapter 23

In the days that followed, Charlotte was glad to see that Nathaniel indeed kept to his words and did not return to that distant place.

It was part of the reason she was so thrilled when he asked her to organize Eva's birthday party. As it was only a few weeks away, she made it her top priority and threw herself into making certain the birthday was the best that the child had ever had.

They decided to have the birthday party

in London, where Eva had friends who would attend. Most of the shopping was also done in London.

On one of the days when they went to purchase the fabric for Eva's new dress, the little girl took her time to tell Charlotte of all the friends she wanted to attend.

“Sarah Portwin, Anne Fisher, Lisa Pillsbury, Olivia Hampton, Lois Finchester, Rachel Eddington ...”

Charlotte listened as Eva went on and on, up to fifteen names. She decided there and then that, on the ride back home, she would have Eva make a list that would be presented to Nathaniel.

That way, they would know to which families to send invitations. As much as the birthday was going to be grand, Nathaniel also wanted it to be as intimate as possible.

She had come to realize that he was a very private man, who led a simple life. It

would not do to have the whole of London at his daughter's birthday party, the first celebration in their family since the passing of his wife.

Just as Eva finished listing the names, they stumbled upon it; the perfect fabric and the perfect color. It was the pink which Eva had dreamed of for days.

The pair came to a stop, needing a moment to take in the beauty of the stuff, while each held their breath. Slowly, Eva

reached out to touch the material. A sigh left her lips as she did.

“Lady Willmington, it is heavenly. This is it. This is what I want to wear. We shall make me a fairy ball gown, and I will be like all those princesses in those books we read. Promise?”

Charlotte smiled, shaking her head. Eva loved asking for promises. She only hoped she could keep count of just how many she had made so far and what exactly they were.

“Always, my dear.” She reached out, too, to touch the fabric, loving the feel of the rich silk in her hands.

“You do have good taste, Eva. We are taking it, and we are going to make it into an absolutely beautiful dress for you. You will see.”

Eva squealed as she heard that, and she proceeded to hug Charlotte tight. Charlotte held her just as close, and the moment

warmed her heart before it ended abruptly.

Something shiny caught Eva's eyes, and she was off again, finding her new love.

They had an exciting day all in all, and, by the time they returned to the manor, Charlotte had a list in her hand for Nathaniel.

She found him in his study, seated on one of the sofas, reading a book with a glass of wine by his side.

As she stepped into the large room, he looked up.

“Charlotte! You have returned.”

The way his face lit up as he said her name made her lips stretch into a smile that filled her eyes. She started to go closer.

“Yes. A short while ago. You are reading again ... another boring old book that talks about business?”

He chuckled at that. “No. It is just a book about geography. I found it on the shelves some days ago, and the first page was intriguing enough. So, I decided to make time for it.”

“You must have been on the grand tour. Surely, you have already visited most of the places mentioned in the book.” She finally arrived before him. She remained on her feet, with her hands folded atop her skirts.

“True, true. Still, it is like revisiting them

all over again through these words and, this time, with more knowledge. Besides, geography is not only about places. It is about weather and rivers, and plains and valleys.” Nathan’s voice was soft, his answer patient, and this close, she could see the twinkle in his eyes.

Charlotte had been happy to see those affections return when he looked at her. Now, they made her feel lightheaded. It was a feeling she was beginning to find enjoyable.

“Perhaps, I shall borrow the book and become just as enlightened.”

His response was quick. “That would be most wonderful, and I am happy to share. Enough about me and this book. Tell me, how was your trip to London this time? Did you find what you were looking for?”

Taking the cue, Charlotte handed over the list Eva had made. As he collected the piece of paper, she sat down on the sofa that lay opposite his.

She waited quietly as he went through the list. When he was done, he heaved a sigh.

“There are only sixteen names here. Thank goodness. I was hoping we would not have too much of a crowd.”

“Sixteen children and their parents or guardians or governesses...”

Nathaniel cut in politely, “Some, two of those. Parents or guardians *and* governesses.

We shall plan for fifty people. That is the most guests we can entertain. I can still manage that number of people being in my home. I know all of these families, and they are a respectable lot.”

Charlotte nodded. “I am glad to hear that you agree with Eva’s choices. She is so excited about the party.”

“And I am thrilled to see her so excited, and grateful that you decided to take this upon yourself. This means a lot to us, as does

every other thing you do. It feels even more special. Thank you, Charlotte.”

She swallowed, understanding that something in the air had changed. The room seemed much smaller now. The setting, more intimate.

She cleared her throat as she found words. “Well, I have said it a hundred times over, and I will say it once more; I enjoy doing this. Believe me, the pleasure is mine. On that note, I would love to show you what I have

planned thus far. The theme for the birthday is Fairy Tale Land. We shall include that in the invitations, so that the parents know to dress their children to fit the theme. There will be princesses, princes, and, of course, fairy godmothers. I have not told Eva yet. I want it to be a surprise. I just know that she will love it.”

“She is smitten with fairy tales. I am certain that she will...”

Their gazes held for a moment. Charlotte

managed to look away, trying to focus on other important matters. She went on, telling him more details she had planned about the party.

He listened attentively, nodding here and there, voicing his agreement when necessary and offering sound counsel when it was needed.

Finally, she finished with her report.

“That is all ... for now.”

Nathaniel looked up at the large, wooden clock that hung on the wall. Then his gaze returned to her.

“An hour has passed since we began talking. I did not even realize it. I suppose what they say is true. Time flies when you are doing something worthwhile, with someone equally as worthy. Perhaps even more so.”

Her heart thrummed softly. She had already fallen in love with the man. She knew this. These days, she was coming to learn that

such falls never stopped. Their depths were endless.

Trying to ignore the way he was making her feel, lest she give it away, Charlotte gave a soft chuckle. “Oh, believe me, it does. It is the same for me when I am with Eva. I never know where the time goes.”

His eyes widened, and she felt a little pleasure rumble inside her. If her answer had done more than surprise him, he did not show it. In fact, he recovered quickly and

responded, “Eva. Yes, of course.” There was a small pause as he adjusted in his position.

“Anyway, once again, I must thank you for doing all this. You came here as a governess, but you have been so much more ... to all of us. I do not know what I would do without you. You are my” He stopped abruptly as that last word left his lips.

Charlotte’s heart leapt, and she was the one who held his eyes captive this time, willing him to finish the statement, to say what she was to him.

She waited, every part of her trembling in anticipation, but her hope was dashed.

Nathaniel swallowed hard, adjusted his clothes, and when he opened his mouth to speak again, all thought of what she was to him appeared to be forgotten.

“All of your help is greatly appreciated. We will not forget any of this. You are valued.”

She wanted to ask what he had meant to say. So badly, that she feared that if she started, she would not be able to stop until she told him just how he made her feel and what he was to her, also...

Her heart was heavy, filled to the brim with all these feelings for him, and she did not trust herself to keep them in any longer. Letting them out, she knew, was a recipe for disaster, so that could not happen, either.

Eventually, she made her peace with not

knowing and let it go. Whatever will be, will be.

“That is wonderful to know, Nathaniel. Thank you, too, for giving me your time. I shall take my leave now and let you go back to your reading.”

With those words, she rose to her feet, bowed her head slightly, and walked out of the study with her spine straight and shoulders squared.

Chapter 24

“Oh, my goodness! Father, it is so beautiful! Lady Willmington! You have made my dreams come true! All my dreams!”

Nathaniel’s lips hurt from grinning too much. Warmth suffused him, and he was filled with more pride than he could ever remember feeling in his lifetime.

The day was finally here. The evening of Eva’s ninth birthday. He had stolen out of his chambers earlier to see what Charlotte had

made of the ballroom.

Impressed was too light a word to use for what he felt. Charlotte had exceeded all expectations. The ballroom was decorated in flowers and bright colors. Props and all, just to make certain that the birthday girl and her guests would indeed feel as though they had truly entered a fairy tale land.

He had known instantly, just as he had when Charlotte had first told him of her plans all those weeks ago, that Eva would fall in

love.

Seeing his daughter's obvious joy thrilled him no end.

“You like it, sweetling?” he asked.

She turned to look at him as though he had asked the most ridiculous question. “Like? Father, I love it! My friends are going to love it, as well! I cannot thank you and Lady Willmington enough.”

“Sweet one, the person who deserves all your gratitude is Lady Willmington. She put all this together in your honor. All I had to do was provide the funding.”

Eva threw her arms around him then, her embrace filled with all the love in the world.

“Nonetheless, this is my best birthday ever! Thank you, Father.”

As she broke away from him, she went to Charlotte.

“Thank you, Lady Willmington. You are the best person there is, and I love you always and forever.”

Nathaniel watched the sweet moment, touched as always. He had grown used to seeing them this way. Those two were almost inseparable, and the love they shared was so profound that sometimes he felt envious.

Charlotte replied, her voice tender, “And I love you, today and always.”

They remained that way for a moment longer. As Eva pulled away, she caught a glimpse of one of her friends.

“Oh my! That’s Anne! She is dressed as a wicked stepmother! She looks so beautiful! I am going to go and say hello. May I, Father?”

It was her special day. She was safe at home. Of course, it was all right. “Absolutely. Be careful though, and do not get into any trouble.”

Before he finished his words, Eva was already dashing away. He called out, stopping her in her tracks. As she turned, he smiled and said, “You look very beautiful tonight, my dear. Just like your mother.”

A million emotions washed over his daughter’s face. Happiness won in the end, and she gave him the brightest grin he had ever seen. Then she bobbed, turned around, and disappeared into the crowd.

Aware that Charlotte was still by his side,
he addressed her.

“Eva was right, you know. You have
outdone yourself. I have never seen a room
look so beautiful. And you ... you look
especially lovely. I am afraid many heads will
turn and breaths will be lost.”

He could not look at her. He feared if he
did, all the feelings that he secretly harbored
for her would come falling through his lips
and he would not be able to stop them.

Daily, her hold on him grew more potent.
He knew he could not resist much longer.
After all, he was starting to fall in love with
her.

From the side of his eyes, he saw her lips
curve into a small smile.

“Why, thank you. You look quite dashing
yourself, my lord. Rumor has it that you are
finally out of mourning and might be finding a
new wife. It is not the season yet but expect to

see many caps set at you tonight. You might want to watch your steps.”

He rolled his eyes at her words, even as he felt a smile tugging his lips apart.

“So, the rumors have begun.”

“Well, we are in London. No one escapes being in the gossip mill at least once in their lifetime.”

“You are so very right.”

She nodded. “I hope you enjoy the ball, Nathaniel. It would please me so.”

She did not wait for a response. Before he could turn to her, she walked away, leaving him staring at her back as she drew further apart from him.

It was the last he saw of her that evening. Admittedly, there were so many guests to greet and, just as Charlotte had envisioned, many young ladies and their mothers to be

respectfully put in their places.

He supposed he could not fault them. He was a young man who had finally come out of mourning his wife, after more than three years. Society expected him to have remarried a long time ago.

Now that he was mingling again, it was only to be expected that people should believe that he was at last ready to seek a new wife.

They were not wrong. Maybe not entirely

ready, but he was starting to think of moving forward. For the first time in a long time, the thought of settling with someone new did not scare him.

It did not bring forth guilt or make him feel as though he was betraying Clara by wanting a new life. He had sworn to love Clara for as long as he lived, and he would always love her.

She had a place in his heart that nobody could replace, not even death. He would honor

her memory for as long as he drew breath.

However, he simply could not continue to deny himself happiness, especially when that happiness would be good for everyone in his household. He knew Clara well enough to now believe that she would want him to have a chance of happiness.

So, yes, he was ready to try again. The only thing was, he had his eyes set on someone. The ladies who had tried to get him to notice them came nowhere close to her.

She was the best there was, his Charlotte, and it was foolish to waste any more time. He decided. He was going to tell her how she made him feel.

At long last. He was finished holding in feelings, trying to hide his love. It had grown even more difficult to maintain his distance in the past few weeks. Tonight, he had decided, was the night that he was going to finally let it all out.

The only problem was that he could not

seem to find Charlotte. Where could she be?

Where had she been all evening?

“Father!”

Eva’s voice drew him out of his thoughts,
and he lowered his gaze to pay her attention.

“Sweetling, see how you shine! I can tell
you are having such a lovely time.”

“It is the best evening of my life, Father!
The best! Thank you so much, once again.

Thank you, thank you!”

She raised her hands, and he picked her up, understanding the gesture. As he did, she dropped a kiss across his face.

“I love you so much, Father.” Her arms went around his neck, and her head rested on his shoulder.

His heart swelled, making his chest grow tighter.

“And I love you, sweet child.”

They remained that way for a moment longer before she pulled away.

“I saw you searching the room... You would not happen to be looking for Lady Willmington, would you?” she asked.

“Ah, she is just the person I need to find. Perhaps you have seen her?”

Eva nodded. “A little while ago. She

asked if I would be all right on my own, as she needed some time to rest in the drawing room.”

Nathaniel looked past the crowd to the door that led out of the room.

“Eva, you are so precious,” he chuckled. It was his turn to give her a kiss on the cheeks. Afterwards, he lowered her to the ground, letting her go once she was on her feet.

“You may continue your celebrations, my

dear. I shall go and find Lady Willmington. I need to have a talk with her.”

As obedient as she wanted to be, Eva nodded, turned around, and disappeared into the crowd once more.

Knowing that she was safe and in good hands, Nathaniel began to march straight for the drawing room.

There was something about fires,

Charlotte thought as she sat by the hearth,
watching the flames crackle with life.

She was mesmerized. The sight before
her eyes calmed her and took her mind away
from troubling thoughts, most of the time, at
least.

At other times, the noise from the
ballroom grew loud, and she could hear the
music, the chatter, the laughter. She would
have to return soon, she knew.

She simply could not bring herself to go back. Not yet. She knew she was now seen as a part of the Burke family, but down there, with all those people present, she felt so out of place ... so lonely.

Lady Burke was under the weather, so she had only graced the event for half an hour. She was in her chambers resting at that moment.

Eva was so taken with her friends and the grandness of it all. Nathaniel? There were

always people around him. Including the ladies Charlotte had promised would flock to his side.

She had been all alone, and it had suddenly become been too much for her to tolerate, especially when she felt that green emotion stirring in her heart as she watched Nathaniel smile with other women.

So, she had made certain she would not be missed by Eva and hidden away in here to enjoy the solitude and occasional silence.

It was far better than standing in the ballroom all alone, while everyone else mingled.

The Burkes' social class was not one that she was familiar with. It was too far up in the hierarchy for a baron's daughter, one who was also an unmarried governess.

Beyond that, seeing everyone there with their families, it reminded her of just how much she had sacrificed. She would never

have a husband or children.

It appeared as if she was fated to love a man who could never be hers and cater to other people's children, never her own.

It made her feel so sad.

A sigh escaped her lips and she rested her head against the arm of the sofa.

“A penny for your thoughts?”

Charlotte startled as the voice sounded in her ears. Blinded by hope, she turned around expecting to see Nathaniel. It was as she saw the man's face that she realized he sounded nothing like the man she loved.

“Although, from how pensive you look, I am afraid I shall have to pay at least ten gold pieces.”

She managed to return his grin, although all she could come up with was a small, almost sad smile.

“Lord Kinsley.”

Lord Kinsley’s brow raised in a frown. “I thought we agreed you are family now and more than allowed to address me by my christened name. Please, Charlotte, Peter. Let me only ever be Peter to you.”

She remembered having a like-mannered argument when they had visited the laboratory. She had not won that either, so why bother to fight?

She still was not completely comfortable around the man, but the trip to the laboratory had helped her learn to allow herself to enjoy his company.

It was for that reason that, when he sat down next to her, she said nothing in protest.

“Peter it shall be, then. How did you find me here? Or were you simply looking for some respite from the party for yourself?”

He shrugged. That night, he was in all-black attire. In the dark drawing room, he easily blended into the shadows, but thanks to the glowing flames, she could see his face very clearly.

It was how she caught his smile, a smile that she noted seemed more of a smirk.

“I am a social creature, Charlotte. I love the soirees, the balls, the plays. I love it all. Most of all, I love the child, Eva, like my own. It is why I came here. However, tonight, I

seem to be ... a little apart from it all Perhaps it was all the food or too much wine. I started to feel a little faint, and I thought it best to take some time away and rest my head ... and legs. And here you are. So, which is it for you? Why are you here?"

“Well, I am good at arranging parties, but, unlike yourself, I am not the social butterfly. When I endeavor to be, it is usually with people that I am familiar with. All the dukes and earls and marquesses below the stairs. I have never felt more out of place. It

was rather too much, so I thought to get away for some quiet.”

She searched his eyes, waiting for that hint of judgment, mockery, but none came. Instead, she saw intrigue and acceptance.

Perhaps she had been too quick to judge Lord Kinsley. After all, he had been a decent man towards her, thus far. Besides, if he were Nathaniel’s best friend, he could not be a terrible person, could he?

“Understandable. Things like this can become overwhelming. Now, I believe fate brought me here because it did not want you to be all alone. Especially after doing such wonderful work. In fact, I do feel miraculously better.”

This time, Charlotte chuckled.

“I am certain you do.”

“Yes. You have done marvels in making Eva’s dreams come true, Charlotte. You are

like her fairy godmother. I know this family. I have been with them through thick and thin, and even a blind man could see that, since you came into their lives, everything has changed for the better.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, even though she was secretly pleased. “Oh surely, not you too?”

“Well, if you have heard it many times before, then I suppose it is the truth, would you not agree? Eva has completely come out

of her shell, and daily she blossoms into this beautiful, amazing young woman. Then, there is Nathaniel. I never thought I would see him so full of life and cheer again.”

Charlotte could hear it in his voice. The love, the commitment, the loyalty. Peter was a true friend to Nathaniel.

“How long have you two known each other?” she asked.

Peter laughed softly, as though he had

just recalled a fond memory.

“For as long as I can remember. We have shared so many experiences together. Firsts, silly mistakes, wise decisions. The first time we met...”

Charlotte listened intently as Peter told her about his friendship with Nathaniel. Hearing him speak about such things gave her even more insight to the kind of man Nathan has always been.

The more she heard, the deeper in love she felt. When Peter began to tell her of the silly jests they had inflicted on their parents and friends, she laughed until her ribs cracked.

She was still laughing when a shadow filled the open doorway. She turned around to see him; her Nathan, in all his handsome glory, staring right at her.

Deep in her heart, she just knew that he had come for her.

Chapter 25

The easiest way to know that you love someone is to listen to what your heart says when they are near.

As Nathan stood by the door, conflicting feelings waging a war inside of him, there was one emotion that stood out ... love. Seeing her now, he suddenly felt at peace.

Although, he could not fathom what Peter was doing here with her and why she had been laughing so happily. The only reason

that he did not challenge his best friend to a duel in that moment was the fact that the doors had been left open.

Beyond that, they were both adults and, therefore, allowed to share the drawing room with no one present for propriety's sake.

He simply did not like to see them so cozy with each other.

Finding his voice, he stepped into the drawing room and greeted them.

“Charlotte, Peter ... I did not realize you two were here together.”

Several thoughts were running through his mind. Thoughts that caused him to wonder if they come in here together to have some moments alone. Away from the crowd and noise.

Was there something going on between these two? Had he misinterpreted Charlotte's interest in him? In fact, he had supposed he

had cause to believe that Charlotte bore feelings for him.

Could he have been wrong?

It was Charlotte who answered.

“Peter only joined me a short while ago. I was here first. I needed to get away.”

Peter spoke then. “And I was feeling lightheaded, so I came to rest my head and feet. Finding Charlotte here was purely

coincidence. Since we are familiar, I thought it only proper to make light conversation, keep each other company. It appears you have come here to speak with her. I shall take my leave now. As I told Charlotte, I feel better already, and all those ladies will not entertain themselves.”

Peter did not wait for a response. With a wink, he rose to his feet, muttered farewell to Charlotte, nodded at Nathaniel, and left the drawing room.

Peter ... Charlotte.

Nathan had not realized they now
addressed each other by their first names.

Hmm.

He waited until he could no longer hear
Peter's footfalls before closing the distance
between himself and Charlotte.

“How are you feeling now?” he asked.

“Much better,” came her response. “It was quite overwhelming. All those people ... so many families. I could not help feeling as though I had no place there.”

Nathan was taken aback by this. He would have never guessed that she felt this way.

“That is absurd. You are family. To us.”

“No, I am your governess,” she answered, not missing a beat. “Yes, you treat me as one

of you, but we both know it is not quite the same.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off.

“We do not have to talk about it. I think it was nice of Peter to keep me company. You have such a good friend, Nathaniel. He tells me you have been close for over a decade.”

“Is that what you were laughing about? You seem to enjoy his company.” He hoped

that came out sounding as casual as he had intended. He did not want to scare her off with his jealousy, as it was something he had no right to be.

Charlotte was free to be with whomever or care for whomever she wanted. After all, he was yet to declare interest in her. The only problem was that Peter wasn't the kind of man she needed.

He loved Peter as a brother, but Peter would not give Charlotte the family she so

clearly wanted. His friend had said it himself.

He was not the family type.

Nathaniel kept this to himself, though, knowing that it was not his place to speak, especially since he could not decide if those words would be coming from a place of love and genuine care, or just plain, green-eyed jealousy.

“In a way. I enjoy my time here in general. He was telling me childhood stories of you two. All the jests you got up to and the

consequences you suffered for each one.”

Nathaniel paused, pleased as well as surprised. They had been speaking about him. They could not have been doing so if either of them had ulterior motives.

Perhaps he was wrong to ever consider that there was something between them? Charlotte cared for him. This was as clear as day, and the sooner he told her those feelings were returned, the better for everyone.

“Ah ... I see. I hope he mentioned I was the quiet one and he the trouble-maker.”

She chuckled softly. Nathaniel relished its sound and committed it to memory. Especially the way her eyes twinkled.

“He did not have to. It is quite easy to see just by spending time with the both of you. True, more years have passed. But you are still as reserved, and he is still as troublesome and especially popular with the ladies.”

It was Nathaniel's turn to chuckle. "A rake is what he is. At the very least, he is honest about that, so I respect him." He grew serious. "Well, enough about Peter. Charlotte, there is something I have to tell you."

Her smile vanished as she became worried. "Is there a problem at the ball? Is that why you came? Eva?"

Her concern touched him.

"No, no, everything is going splendidly,

Eva is happiness itself. Things could not be better,” he replied, attempting to reassure her.

The words seemed to assuage her fears, for she sighed in relief.

He continued, “What I wish to talk to you about only concerns us ... the both of us.”

She adjusted her position, and he knew that he had her full attention. Suddenly, words failed him. He could no longer find the right ones to say.

“Yes? I am all ears.”

He opened his mouth, but nothing came still. Just as he was about to try again, his mother’s voice filled the room, ruining the moment.

“Oh, there you are! We have been looking all over the place for you two. It is time to cut the cake, and you must not miss it. It is the most important part of the party, and Eva needs you two by her side.”

Nathaniel rose to his feet. “Mother, I thought you were asleep, resting as you should be.”

“Oh, I was. I told Cecilia to let me know when this moment was about to happen. I would not miss it, not when I still have breath in me. Come now, we must not keep our guests waiting any longer.”

With those words, she went away.

Nathaniel turned to look at Charlotte again, heart sunken. That had been his chance. He was certain he would have finally found the words if his mother had not interrupted.

It was just as well. The night was still young. He would simply find another perfect moment to declare his feelings to Charlotte.

With that in mind, he gave her his arm and escorted her back into the ballroom.

As the night came to a close, Nathaniel's

frustration knew no end. He had not been able to find another such moment for the rest of the ball.

Eva always had one performance or the other up her sleeves, keeping them in the ballroom, fascinated and watching her show off her many talents.

There had been no way to leave, and it was impossible to discuss such delicate matters in a room filled with people.

When his head touched his pillow, he
made another vow.

Tomorrow. I will let her know tomorrow.

A few days after Eva's birthday ball, they
returned to the estate in Wimsley. Charlotte
could not deny that she had enjoyed her time
in London, but she was happy to be back
home.

It was so much more peaceful here in the
countryside, so quiet. She loved the fields, the

villages. She loved going for rides whenever it suited her fancy.

Most especially, she loved mornings like this when she could sit on the balcony, look at the beautiful meadow, and sip her tea on a cold morning.

No fumes in the air or streets urchins running about. To think that she had lived all her life in London, and now it no longer felt like home.

In a few weeks winter would be fully here. Christmas was just around the corner.

It had been six months since she had arrived to work with the Burkes. It seemed only yesterday that Lady Burke had walked up to her at Mary's wedding.

So much had happened in the time since then. A lot had changed. There was nothing she would alter if given the chance. She was grateful for all of it.

She did not know how much time she had left in this place. She was aware they could keep her till Eva was old enough to enter society. That would be a very long time.

What would it mean for her? Was this the life she would lead forever? Was she really past the age of starting her own family?

And Nathaniel? She thought of him very often. He was not around as much these days. She wondered why. Wondered if she would ever tell him of her feelings or discover if he

felt the same way.

That night in the drawing room, she had hoped he would make some confession of the sort. She thought she had seen it in his eyes. If only Lady Burke had not interrupted them.

It was just as well. Perhaps even for the best.

A shiver went down her spine as a gust of cold wind suddenly blew in her direction. Quickly, she lifted her cup to her lips and

drank her fill.

The tea had been steaming when she brewed it. Now, it was almost cold.

It was going to be a long winter.

“Ah! We meet again.”

She did not turn around. Neither was she startled. She had heard the footsteps, and, this time, she easily recognized the voice.

“Peter, you are here early today,” she greeted him as he sat beside her. She looked at him, then.

“Yes. I was returning from Humshire after visiting a friend yesterday. I decided to stop by, since the estate is on my way. A very lovely morning to you.” He was as charming as ever, but those charms were never potent on her.

She managed a small smile, nodding at his explanation.

“And to you too, my lord.”

“You look radiant in the morning light, as always. But ... something tells me you are troubled.”

“Is this becoming a habit then, you finding me at times when I am like this?”

“Perhaps the universe keeps making our paths cross for a reason. I did manage to make you feel better the other time, did I not?”

She nodded.

“Come on then. Tell me what it is this time. Mayhap I shall have some magic words to perform tricks. Say ... Abracadabra?”

A chuckle broke free, and she marveled at how easily he had managed to make her laugh.

His eyes twinkled. “A-ha! It would appear I was not wrong after all. I did not

even have to try so hard. I am happy to see you laugh, Charlotte. Your face has such beauty that it was created for only happiness. Never be sad. It befits you not.”

“Thank you, Peter. You are ... a good man.” She meant every word. The last of her reservations were already beginning to fade.

He lifted his shoulder in a shrug. “Well, I try to be. Speaking of good men, I sense Nathaniel is not in. He was not in his study when I checked, and he is not one to be in his

chambers at this hour.”

At the mention of his name, Charlotte’s shoulders dropped, her mood turning sour again.

“He was not at breakfast either. I believe he left early this morning. I do not know where he went. Even Lady Burke does not seem to have an answer.”

“Hmm...” was all Peter said. He looked to be deep in thought himself.

Charlotte watched him, wondering what was going through his mind. Finally, he spoke.

“You care for him, do you not?”

It was a question, yet the way Peter asked it was as though he already knew the truth and would not be convinced otherwise.

Sighing, she replied. “Is it that obvious?”

“As clear as day for anyone who cares to

see. He is a good man, Charlotte. You are a wonderful woman. The heavens know that you two will make a great match, but I am afraid Nathaniel is not ready for such commitment now. He has only just recovered from mourning his wife, finally. We waited three years patiently for that.” Peter paused to draw in a breath. As he released it, he continued.

“He is a good man, but a man, nonetheless. He will not be looking to settle down after such a long drought. Especially not

when he has many women flocking around him. I do not wish to break your heart, but ...”

Charlotte held her breath. She was heartbroken already. Whatever more Peter had to say would only help her accept that she must let go of this foolishness and move ahead with her life.

“Say it.”

“He seems to be enjoying the company of many women lately. I have been hearing tales,

and, once or twice, I have seen it for myself. I suppose Eva's birthday really opened his eyes to all he had been missing all this while. He has not been around much since then, has he?"

Charlotte shook her head. Her chest was suddenly tight, and breathing proved almost impossible.

Peter's face grew somber, sad even. "Poor child. She wishes every night would be like her birthday. She needs her father now more

than ever, but I do not think he has the time to care anymore. I shall speak to him, though, rest assured. I know he will listen to me and keep doing right by his daughter. However, it is you I am most concerned about. Charlotte, you are a beautiful, amazing woman. You cannot live all your life waiting around for him.”

Charlotte swallowed hard. A part of her wanted to scream and tell Peter to stop talking. Tell him he had no inkling what he was saying. Tell him that Nathaniel would

never do such a thing.

He was not that kind of man.

Yet, she could not. After all, he had indeed been a lot more absent lately, and she had seen him that night at the ball. How the women flirted with him and how he entertained them.

She had thought he was just being polite, but what if that was not the case, and all that Peter was saying was right? Besides, Peter

loved Nathaniel like his own brother.

What need would he have to lie? She drew in a long breath and exhaled.

“I only care about Eva. I can take care of myself. Do have that talk with him. I shall also do the same if I see no improvement. Thank you, Peter.”

He nodded, his eyes sad. Reaching out, he took her hand and squeezed.

“And you? Will you be all right?”

Tears stung her eyes, but she pushed them back. “Certainly. I... It was foolish of me to entertain any feelings, to dare hope that anything would come of them. I never should have forgotten my place. I am here to govern Eva, and I shall continue to do so until my help is no longer required, and I am relieved of my duties. Thank you for coming here, Peter.”

“I feel as though I should not have

spoken. I have made things worse.” His voice was almost breaking.

Charlotte covered their hands with her other hand. “No, do not feel that way, please. I needed to hear these things. I am glad you told me.” She nodded, bowing her head. “Grateful. Now, I can concentrate on more important things.”

Peter reached for her chin, and softly, he raised her face, so he could look into her eyes. “You are such a strong woman. It is a pity he

does not see you the way I see you.” Tenderly, he stroked her cheeks, making her eyes flutter close.

His touch made her feel nothing, but she could not recall the last time she had been touched so affectionately.

Remembering herself, she opened her eyes. He was still looking at her. There was something in those ice blue eyes that made her feel chilly all over again.

Her reservations returned, heightening her discomfort. She pulled out of his reach, not liking the closeness anymore.

She had been vulnerable for a moment, and she hated to think that Lord Kinsley was the kind of man who would try to take advantage of that.

He noticed her withdrawal but said nothing. He, too, simply drew away.

She cleared her throat, making a point to

avoid his gaze this time. She had never felt awkwardness this thick in the air before. Not even between herself and her father.

“Thank you, Peter. You are so kind.”

She rose to her feet. “Thank you for the talk. If you would excuse me, I must go to check on Eva. She must be done with her piano lessons by now. Of course, you are welcome to stay as long as you want.”

He, too, rose to his feet. He easily

towered over her, but she refused to be intimidated.

“No, I must be going. I have matters I need to attend to in my home. We shall see each other again very soon. Until then, farewell.”

“Travel safely,” she responded. It was a small whisper.

With a nod, he turned to leave.

As she watched him go, Charlotte began to breathe more easily. For the life of her, she could not begin to comprehend what had just happened.

She knew only two things for certain; she was done chasing dreams where Nathaniel was concerned.

As for Peter, she would do well to stay away from him as much as she could.

With those thoughts in mind, she went in

search of Eva.

Chapter 26

“That was a good race! We should do this more often. Good heavens! I cannot believe how long it has been. I truly miss this, Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel laughed as he slowed his horse to a stop. He felt alive. Having a race had been a welcome suggestion, and he had given it his all.

Not that it was important who won or lost, but he was glad he had defended his

honor in his home.

“As do I. It appears that you are in need of practice. I remember a time when it would not have been so easy to win.”

Peter took that as lightly as Nathaniel had meant it. He threw his head back in laughter before dismounting the horse.

“You are right. I have gotten so used to traveling in carriages that I hardly ride anymore. I must start putting my field to good

use once again. What do you say? After the worst of winter is over, you could come to visit me at the manor, and we will have another race.”

Nathaniel dismounted his horse and handed the reins over to the stable boy.

“Have my chambers prepared,” he answered. “I shall make sure to be there. It has been a while since I visited you. You are always the one visiting. I have been such a bad friend.”

“Not at all. I know how busy you are, and I understand. Beyond that, I am hardly ever in one place. You know how much I love traveling.”

“That is true,” Nathan agreed. Peter was always away on one trip or the other.

As they started to walk back to the house, they broke into light conversation. They had just reached the doors that would lead them in when Nathaniel sighted her.

Charlotte. She was with Eva, and they looked engrossed in whatever it was they were doing.

His heart skipped a beat, and he willed it to be still.

He missed her.

He had been unable to tell her of his feelings the day after Eva's ball as he had vowed.

He had been called away on an urgent matter that morning, and when he returned, it just didn't seem like the right moment anymore.

Since that day, his hands had been filled with several matters, including finding the mystery man, Gregory Brighton. Mathew was doing all he could, but there was nothing yet.

Not one single thing that could lead them to Mr. Brighton's whereabouts. There were

some business difficulties, too, as the weather was making it difficult for ships to sail.

There were also some problems in the small village of Wimsley.

All these matters were weighing on him, causing him to be away from home for most of the time.

He could not speak to Charlotte about it.

Even if he wanted to, there was no time.

Besides, he could not tell her all of it and definitely not anything of his search for Mr. Brighton. He had left that part out when he sought his mother's counsel on the other troubles.

He simply did not want them getting worried. Charlotte was a particularly emotional being. If she were troubled, it would affect Eva, for she would not be able to hide it.

All three women in his life mattered

greatly to him. It was his duty to shield them, protect, and provide, make them happy. He would manage things alone.

Only, until then, he wished that Charlotte would not have him so confused.

She had grown so cold lately ... distant. She no longer laughed at his jokes or held his gaze. All the warmth he used to feel when she was near seemed to have never existed.

It was killing him. Many times, he had

tried to get her alone so they could talk. She always found one excuse or another to take her leave.

He was at his wit's end. He did not know what else to do. He had racked his brain over and over, thinking of what sin he had committed to make her treat him this way.

He could think of nothing.

He knew he was the problem because with everyone else, she was still her happy,

warm, cheery self.

“Having woman troubles, my friend?”

Drawn out of his thoughts, he looked at Peter and sighed.

“It would appear so. For the life of me, I cannot fathom what I have done wrong. Charlotte will not speak with me. She has been so ... strange lately. Distant. She is like a whole new person. She was not even this way when we were nothing but strangers. The

worst part is, she continues to be wonderful and warm towards everyone else. Everyone except me.”

“Hmm ... did you tell her of your feelings for her?”

That question took him aback. He jerked his head, turning to face Peter fully.

“What feelings?”

Peter rolled his eyes rather theatrically.

“Oh, Nathaniel. Do not play the ignorant. We both know what I speak of. You might have been able to deny it before but not anymore. You are deeply attracted to her. Care for her, love her.”

Nathaniel's head began to spin even as his heart hammered in his chest.

“That is ridiculous.” *What had given him away?*

Peter's response was a soft knowing

chuckle. “Nathaniel, I have known you for over a decade. I watched you fall in love with Clara and woo her until she was yours. I know how you are when you are in love, and presently, I know that you are. So, I ask again, have you told Charlotte of your feelings?”

Aware that he had been cornered, he stopped trying to deny it.

“Of course not. Although I have wanted to. I just have not been able to find the right moment or the right words.”

“I advise you do not. If I can tell, then she can, as well. Ladies do not like it when men are so obvious about their feelings. Beyond that, you are her employer, Nathaniel. She is your daughter’s governess. How do you think your advances would make her feel? She might believe that she would not be able to reject them, as she is in your employment. Hence, the reason she would rather never hear of those feelings.”

His head kept spinning. “You mean to say

she plans to reject my advances?” Why did it feel like a knife had just been lodged in his heart?

“Look at her. See how she cares for your daughter. She is so dedicated to Eva. Charlotte takes her job very seriously. She is twenty-four and unmarried, Nathaniel. You think if she wanted a family, she would not have one by now? This is what she loves to do, what she has dedicated her life to. Whatever you propose, you would make things more complicated by doing so. If you truly love her,

do you want to put her in such a position?”

“But ... you were the one who started putting these ideas in my head. About how I should remarry? How she would make a good wife!”

“I did not know her then. Charlotte and I, as you know, have grown close. Never worry, we only share friendship, nothing more. I would never betray you like that, knowing how strongly you feel for her. There is nothing more important to Charlotte than her job. I

know that now. It is why I am the right person to give you this counsel. Let Lady Willmington be. There are tons of other women who would jump at the thought of being your wife, your duchess. You must begin to search outside the four walls of this manor.”

Peter’s words sunk deep. Head still spinning, Nathaniel turned to look at Charlotte once again.

He saw it then, very clearly. As she laughed with the child, hugged her, kissed her,

patiently instructed her.

This was Charlotte's one true love, and he could not fault her for keeping her distance when she sensed that he wished to take that away from her.

Goodness, he felt like such a fool! He had truly believed his feelings were reciprocated. Maybe not in like magnitude but close at the very least.

To now discover this at the hands of his

best friend ... how could he have been so blind? So selfish? So thoughtless?

He owed her an apology. Until he decided the best way to do that, he would heed Peter's words and keep his distance.

It hurt, but thenceforth, he would no longer entertain such feelings for her. He would work to get rid of them, and he would treat her only as part of the staff. It was decided.

Heaving a heavy sigh, even as his heart broke into a million pieces, he said to Peter, “I am so glad I spoke to you regarding this. Thank you for helping me see the light. You are a true friend.”

“I am glad I could help you see things clearly. That is what brothers do, after all.”

Nathaniel nodded, forcing a smile.

“Indeed. Indeed.”

Chapter 27

She should not have come.

That was the thought running through Charlotte's mind as she stood in a corner, watching Nathaniel flirt shamelessly with the women.

When Eva had told her of the invitation to a friend's lunch party, she had known it would be expected of her to accompany the child. However, considering what had happened the last time a gathering like this

took place, she had had her reservations.

Lady Burke had sensed this and tried to persuade her. That woman and her granddaughter made Charlotte too weak to refuse them anything individually.

When they joined forces? She stood no chance.

So, she had given in and followed them anyway. Nobody told her Nathaniel would be joining them. She had been shocked to see him

arrive only an hour after them.

Of course, she was aware that he was here mainly for Eva, but judging by the way he had laughed with the ladies all afternoon, it was easy to see that he also had other motivations.

Ever since the conversation with Peter, she had taken great care to stay away from her employer. It was difficult. More difficult than raising all her sisters alone had been.

No matter how hard she tried, she could not bring herself to stop loving the man. So many times, she had to fight against telling him, struggle against the desire to be in his presence, close to him.

She was at war with herself because she wanted to be with him. To smile with him, laugh with him, just like old times, but she could not, not anymore.

Not when it hurt knowing that they did not belong together and could never be.

When she had started to withdraw, he had tried to reach out to her, to close the gap. These days, he was just as distant as she. She could feel him slowly slipping away.

Every now and then, she caught him staring at her from across the hall, the field, the dining table. Sometimes, he caught her staring, too.

It was madness. And this ... standing here, watching him act as though he had no

care in the world, was torture.

It was quite funny to consider how fate worked. All these years, she had had suitors who were willing to marry her, build a family with her. She had turned them all away.

Now here she was, finally in love with a man that could never be hers.

She had contemplated leaving the manor, but she knew she could never bring herself to abandon Eva. She had made promises. Beyond

that, Eva was the light in her life. To live without her...

She heaved a sigh and looked in his direction again. She could not make out the words they were saying. There were three new ladies around him.

Charlotte could see that they were not missing any opportunity to touch him. A brush of his sleeve, a casual tap on his shoulder. She saw how they unabashedly batted their eyelashes and pretended to blush behind their

fans.

Nathaniel seemed completely at home among them. There was that smile. From the distance, she could not quite tell if it reached his eyes. She supposed it did. After all, he looked rather happy.

He began to turn in her direction, and she looked away quickly. Her heart skipped a beat, and she closed her eyes, waiting for it to recover.

When she opened them, she felt a presence beside her. The masculine scent told her who it was before she looked up at his face.

“Is anything the matter? You do not look well.”

Charlotte rolled her eyes, sighing. She did not particularly care for Peter’s presence at that moment. Besides, why did he always appear whenever she was in a sour mood? Something did not seem right.

“I am perfectly well, Peter. I am just ... exhausted. The past few days have been very busy. I traveled to see my sister for some days. She took ill, and I have been worried.”

“Yes, I heard. I noticed you were away, so I asked about your whereabouts. How is she now? And the child?” Peter sounded genuinely concerned.

“They are both well now. The day draws near when she will be giving birth.”

“My prayers are with them. We shall hear the voice of both mother and child.”

She looked up at him, touched by the sincerity she heard in his voice.

“Thank you,” she whispered, tired of the conflicting feelings this man stirred in her.

“Please, do not mention it. I believe you need all the rest you can get, Charlotte. I know you are here for Eva, but you will not be much

help if you are not in full health yourself. Will you allow me to escort you home?”

His eyes were perhaps the softest she had ever seen them. Was she ready to leave now? Well, a moment ago, she had been thinking about how she should not have come.

“I came with Her Grace and Eva. It would be wrong to leave them behind.”

His lips curved into a small smile. “Then I shall speak with Ophelia and see if we

cannot get her to come with us. Eva can return with Nathaniel.”

He left her side before she could form a response. Charlotte watched as he walked to Lady Burke and whispered something in her ear.

Lady Burke immediately lit up with relief. She crossed the room to whisper something into Nathan’s ear. He nodded and together they searched the room for Eva.

When they found her, Lady Burke
nodded and left her son's side.

In no time, she and Peter reached
Charlotte.

“Oh dear, Peter tells me you are not
feeling too well. You should have mentioned
it. He is right. You do look pale. Come, come,
we must return home. It is just as well that I
am tired myself. I fear my old age is beginning
to catch up with me. I find I can no longer
enjoy gatherings like these for long hours.”

Charlotte smiled at this. Lady Burke looked as fit as always. She probably just needed to take more rest.

“Your Grace, you are as agile as ever. You have been expending yourself with all the trips to London, the estate in Wimsley, and back here. I recommend you stay off the roads for another month or so. That way, you will recover your full strength.”

“As long as you shall be taking care of

your health also,” Lady Burke responded,
returning the smile.

“You have my word,” came Charlotte’s
swift reply.

Peter, who had quietly watched their
little exchange, spoke then. “Ladies, shall we?”

Nodding, both women hooked their arms
around his, and he walked them out of the tea
house, a proud smile on his face.

Charlotte tried to steal one last glance at Nathaniel as they left. This time, she caught him looking at her. Her entire body tingled, and a voice whispered inside her head, “*Be still heart. He is not yours.*”

When Nathaniel returned home later that evening, he was hoping to see Charlotte. Alas, he was told that she had retired to her chambers early.

He was worried about her. After the conversation with Peter, he had tried his best

to be a good man and do right by her. He had put as much distance between them as she had, respecting her wishes to be left alone.

It was killing him each day. So much that she consumed his every thought.

Even when he slept, she visited his dreams. He feared he was going mad.

Lady Willmington had dug her way into his heart and buried herself deep within. Now, he was at a loss regarding how to get her out.

He was not supposed to be at the Teahouse that afternoon, but when he heard Charlotte would be there, he had been unable to keep himself from going.

Oh yes, he had lied to everyone, including himself, that he was there for Eva. Well, part of him was. The other part had graced the event just so he could get a glimpse of Charlotte.

It had been worth it. All the while he had

been speaking with the other women, politely rejecting their advances, she had been on his mind.

Every now and then, he had stolen glances, hoping he would not get caught as he had been so many other times.

When he had caught her staring at him, his heart had somersaulted in his chest. He had not known what to make of that. Why had she been looking at him?

What if Peter was wrong?

Then his mother had come to him to let him know that they were leaving because neither she nor Charlotte were feeling very well. He had wanted to walk across the room to her, lift her up in his arms, and take her home himself.

He would sit by her bedside all day if she let him.

He had seen it easily after his mother left

his side. She had looked upset, pale. Perhaps he would demand that she took the next few days off.

After all, the holidays had begun, and lessons had been put on hold. It would do her well to rest her body and mind.

Seeing her leave with Peter had not been easy to stand, but Nathaniel had tried. After all, his best friend had promised that nothing of a romantic sort would ever happen between him and Charlotte.

Nathaniel knew he could trust Peter.

Nevertheless, he also knew that Charlotte was the kind of woman to make men do things they never thought they would.

Look at him. Half a year ago he had laughed at the idea of taking her as his wife when Peter had suggested it. Now, nothing would make him happier.

As he stepped into his chamber, a heavy sigh left his lips.

The journal on the table caught his eye,
and he sighed again.

Thankfully, he had managed to get his
other problems under control. In fact, he
believed he had settled them satisfactorily.
Except for Charlotte and the mystery man.

The former, he was learning to accept.
The latter?

There was nothing about Mr. Brighton

yet. It was as though he did not exist.

All the men they had found by that name did not match the image of the man who had walked up to Nathaniel that fateful afternoon all those years ago.

Nathaniel despised not having answers. The last time he had spoken with Mathew, the earl had told him to let it go. In Mathew's words, Nathaniel could not let the past keep eating him up. Still, it was a past Nathaniel could not bring himself to let go of.

He had fallen in love with another woman. Missed her terribly when she was not near him or speaking to him. Wanted her with everything he was.

He had to honor Clara by finding this man. It was the least he could do. Perhaps then, the guilt in his heart would be assuaged, and he would finally know peace.

No, he was not going to give up. He would keep searching until he learned the

truth.

Chapter 28

“Steady, girl. Easy. Easy.”

Charlotte smiled as the horse settled and gently followed her lead to a tree. Firmly, she tied its reins to one of the branches. She patted the mare's head affectionately before walking away to stand by the river.

As she came to a stop, she closed her eyes and breathed in the cool fresh air. The soft noise of the flowing river filled her ears. The chirping of birds, rustling of leaves.

This was exactly what she had come here for. The quiet and the peace.

Upon Nathaniel's instructions, she had not been allowed to perform any of her governess's duties for a week. He had made it clear that he wanted her to get plenty of rest and recover fully.

Of course, she had been touched by this, and yes, it had made her even more confused. On the other hand, she was beginning to grow

weary of doing nothing.

She still spent time with Eva, but they were either reading books or talking about nothing and everything.

Her days had been filled with waking up, drinking tea, and sleeping.

That evening, she had decided to leave the house. She could not bear staying cooped up any longer.

Riding felt wonderful.

The chilly wind, the horse's strength, nature. Now, she was here, far away from all her troubles and worries.

She should have done this a long time ago. Well, she would not deny that the week's break from all that work had done her a lot of good.

She felt significantly better, stronger, and well rested. It would be New Year's in a few

days. By the time it arrived, she would be more than ready to begin teaching lessons again.

She remained standing, relishing the strain it was putting on her legs. Tuning out all the voices in her head, she concentrated on the sounds surrounding her.

All she heard was sweet harmony. Different parts of nature, coming together to make a beautiful melody.

That was how she heard it easily ... the
hooves pounding against earth.

She turned around to watch the rider
arrive, all the while wondering who it could
be. As his face came into view, she rolled her
eyes.

Peter Kinsley. *Again.*

What was the matter with the man!?
Why was he always seeking her out? Should
she be worried? Yet he did not seem

particularly harmful.

It was only ... despite how charming and warm he could be, many times, he still made her feel uncomfortable.

“There you are!” he called as he reined in his horse and halted near her.

Charlotte said nothing. She simply waited, patient, as he dismounted and walked up to her.

“Am I supposed to owe this to a coincidence, as well?” she asked as he reached her.

His brow rose as though he had been taken aback by her question, but the smile on his face never faltered.

“Er ... no. Not this time. I actually came looking for you, although I was here to see Nathaniel. There is a matter which I must discuss with him. As always in recent times, I am met with his absence. Just as I was about

to leave, I caught sight of you riding away. So, I borrowed one of the horses from the stable and followed you.”

“I see,” she responded, not caring that her voice sounded cold. She had really wanted to be alone.

If he noticed, he did not make it obvious. Still smiling, he looked about.

“Well, this is a nice scene. I have not been here in so long, I almost forgot it exists. I

have always told Nathaniel that his estate could pass for a small village. Growing up, I loved it here a lot. Sometimes, I wish I had been born a Burke, and that this was mine, too.”

He was not looking at her, so she could not see his eyes. But there was something in his voice. It gnawed at her.

Not knowing how to feel about that and his words, she tucked it into a corner of her mind.

“So, you rode all the way out here to see me?”

Peter nodded. “We have not had much opportunity to speak since the lunch party. I wanted to know how you are faring. Although, from the looks of it, I can see that you have regained your strength.”

Charlotte turned around, so that they stood side by side, facing the river.

“The wonders a week of idleness can do. Thank you for caring so much, Peter. Truly, I am grateful.”

“Oh, it is nothing. You are a part of this family. Here we take care of our own.”

She felt his gaze upon her, but she did not turn to look at him.

“I used to be happy to hear that. These days, I do not know how to feel.”

There was a small pause. It was a moment of silence that Charlotte savored. Albeit it did not last. In another breath, Peter broke the spell.

“This is about Nathaniel, is it not? You are still enamored by him?”

Charlotte pondered answering that question. Eventually, she gave in. Peter was the only one she could talk to. Keeping all those thoughts and feelings in was threatening to make her go mad.

“It is not as though I have not been trying to ... kill my feelings for him. They just will not go away. I do not know what to do. It...” She swallowed hard. “It pains me.”

She could feel the pain in her chest growing daily. Tears rushed to her eyes, and she blinked rapidly, pushing them back.

“Charlotte, you must not stop trying. You know how it is. Even if Nathaniel decides to take a wife, I do not think it can ever be you.

He will never marry a governess, a baron's daughter. He is a duke, and he has responsibilities. He must take a wife that would benefit his dukedom politically. I ... I spoke with him."

Charlotte looked up at him then, eyes widened. "Y—you did?"

Peter nodded. "Yes. Never worry, I did not tell him of your feelings. In fact, he had no inkling we had discussed such matters. I simply asked in a tease."

Charlotte's heart began to thud. She wanted to know, yet she feared it would kill her if she did.

“What did he say?” The question left her lips before she could finish thinking.

Peter grew somber. When he spoke, his voice was solemn. “That you are beautiful and lovely and that you would make a wonderful mother and wife ... just not his. He must marry properly this time, within his class. He's

already considering a few ladies. All heiresses.”

A tear slipped free, and she hurriedly wiped it away. Something inside of her broke and in a whisper, she said, “I see.”

“Charlotte, I am...”

“Don’t. Please, don’t. I feel humiliated enough as it is. I understand all you have said. Thank you. Perhaps knowing this now, my heart will find it easier to ... move ahead.”

Peter left her side to stand in front of her.
Taking her by the shoulders, he shook her
softly until she held his gaze.

More tears flowed.

She had never felt so mortified in her life.

Torn, Peter wiped her face clean with
both hands.

“Oh, Charlotte. Sweet Charlotte. Do not

be sad. I do not want to see you sad. Not over Nathaniel. He is not deserving of you, not in the very least. You are far too beautiful, too lovely to be sad over a man who does not know better. A man too blind to see just how precious the gem is in front of him.”

Charlotte fought hard, but more tears flowed regardless. She was in pain. It hurt too badly. She would do anything to have the pain go away. Anything. She simply wished to stop feeling. To stop loving Nathaniel Burke.

Peter continued to whisper sweet nothings as he dried her tears. Finally, she got hold of herself and managed to stop the river of tears to stop flowing.

As she did, Peter began to lean into her, his eyes searching hers for something. An answer?

Charlotte drew back, wondering what was happening, what he intended to do. He did not stop. He only pulled closer until his lips brushed hers.

Immediately, she broke out of her daze, understanding now what was happening.

Shocked, she shook herself out of his hold and took two steps back.

“Peter! Goodness! What was that?”

He tried to grab her hand, but she stepped back again.

“Charlotte ... Nathaniel does not see it,

but I do. I always have, right from the first moment I laid my eyes on you. Please, Charlotte, give me a chance.”

Charlotte could not believe her ears. Her head hurt. Peter? All this time, he had designs on her? Had wanted her for himself?

So many things suddenly began to fall into place. As they did so, she realized how she might have given him the impression that there was a chance for them, and she felt sad.

“Peter, I am so sorry, but I cannot. I do not see you that way. I never have. You are only a friend to me, nothing more.”

He stepped forward, closing the distance between them. This time, he caught her hand before she could move away.

“We can change that... Just let me. I will make you happy, I promise. I will give you everything you could ever want. Charlotte, we would be happy together, so happy. We would have that beautiful family you want so much.”

“No!” She tore her hands free and fled several paces away from him.

“Charlotte?”

Shaking her head, she answered, “We cannot be anything more than we are, Peter. We cannot and will never be a family. I am sorry.”

With those words, she spun around, marched to her horse, untied the reins, and

mounted.

As she settled in the saddle, Peter called out to her.

“Charlotte, this conversation is not over. Run all you want, but I will have you. You cannot escape me for much longer.”

Potent fear filled her, sending shivers down her spine.

His voice, his eyes, his stance. She had

never seen him look so menacing.

It was as though the warm and charming facade he had been wearing all this while had fallen away, and she finally saw him for who he really was.

It became clear why she had never completely liked the man. He was two-faced and dangerous.

She thought of giving a response but decided against it. Shaking her head, she

turned the horse around, kicked her sides, and sent her into a wild gallop.

Just then, the afternoon turned dark. The clouds soon bellowed with thunder and lightning whipped across the sky. That was the only warning she received. The next moment, the heavens began to weep.

Charlotte did not stop. She kept moving through the storm, eager to get as far away from Peter as possible, drenched to the bones or not.

Chapter 29

Nathaniel stood by the large windows in the hallway, looking out at the heavy downpour. The storm had come without warning. He was glad to have arrived home just before it began.

Woe to anyone who got caught in a storm like this.

Just as he was thinking that, he caught sight of two riders returning to the stable. Upon a closer look, he saw that the first was

none other than Charlotte and following behind her was Peter.

Nathaniel's heart broke. He could no longer deny the obvious. Although Peter had given him his word, it was clear that there was something going on between him and Charlotte.

Perhaps that was the true reason Charlotte had been taking great care to avoid him? Could all that Peter had told him be nothing but lies? Made up tales to get him to

squash his love for Charlotte, so they could be together?

No. Surely, it could not be? He had known Peter for the better part of his life. Charlotte ... she was a decent woman. If she ever chose to be with Peter, certainly, she would have found the courage to tell him.

Oh, he should have known.

Peter was the ladies' man with wiles that very few women were not susceptible to. It

would appear that Charlotte was not one of those women.

How sad. How terribly sad.

Nathaniel thought of how to handle this realization. Whether to walk up to them and confront them. Let them know he knew what was truly going on.

Demand the truth?

He shook his head, turning away from

the window. The pain in his heart was raw,
and he knew that he had never felt so
heartbroken.

What would he do?

“Your Grace, I have been looking all over
for you.”

Grateful for the distraction, he turned to
Frederick. “Yes? What is the matter?”

“While you were away, a letter arrived

for you, Your Grace. The moment I heard of your return I sought you out, so that I could deliver the message.”

Nathaniel eyed the envelope in Frederick’s hands, wondering what the letter was about.

After a moment, he took the envelope and nodded at Frederick.

“Light the lamps. The storm brought nightfall early.”

Nodding, Frederick did as he was told. As light filled the hallway, Nathaniel looked at the envelope.

It had arrived from Ensworth, Peter's duchy. He wondered if this was Peter's way of confessing. Shrugging, he opened the envelope, unfolded the letter, and began to read.

Lord Burke,

I have been contemplating writing to you for some time now. I would have visited your manor like the last time, but I was afraid you would turn me away again. I did not wish to trespass.

I hear that you have been looking for me. I know you have not had any luck. It is why I am writing. If you are looking to find me, something must have happened, just as I warned.

Well, there is much that you must know. I have held my peace all these years, but I am afraid my conscience will not let me do so any

longer.

*I am willing to speak now. The time is right.
Come to Hyde Park on Wednesday. I shall be
waiting there at the twelfth hour. Do not worry
about finding me. I will come to you.*

Yours,

G.B

Nathaniel's hands shook as he finished reading the letter. Mr. Brighton had written to him. He could not believe it.

Finally, there was a silver lining in this dark sky.

“Frederick! Have the carriage ready. As soon as the storm lets up, we are going to London.”

The storm raged until the middle of the night. As soon as day broke the next morning, Nathaniel embarked on the journey to London.

He had received the letter on a Tuesday,

so he knew he could not afford to waste any more time or take chances. As soon as he arrived in London, he headed straight for Hyde Park.

He got there an hour before the appointed time, so he waited rather impatiently. As soon as the twelfth hour struck, he felt a presence by his side.

“Lord Burke?”

Nathaniel turned swiftly, instantly

recognizing the man.

“Mr. Brighton!”

The man smiled. “Wentworth, Your Grace. My real name is Jacob Wentworth. That is why you could not find me. I used an alias the last time we met for my own protection, as you will come to understand. When I heard that someone was in search of a certain Gregory Brighton, I immediately knew it was you who was looking for me.”

Nathaniel looked the man over. He did not seem to have changed a bit. Not one bit. Mr. Wentworth was right there. In front of him.

“I ... I do not know what to say.”

Jacob smiled. “I assume you must have a lot of questions. I shall answer them. Shall we walk? I chose this place because there are no walls and the air is always filled with chatter. It would be hard for the wind to carry any tale.”

Nathaniel nodded, understanding. They began to walk side by side.

Jacob started to talk again. “I must apologize for requesting your presence on such short notice. I do not have much time left in England. I have a ship bound for Spain on the morrow.”

“It is well. I am happy to be here,” Nathaniel said.

“Ah ... I must also apologize for coming into your home three years ago. It was the wrong time, the wrong place.”

“No, please do not apologize for that. I should have listened.”

“In the state you were in? Your reaction was entirely human and expected.

Nevertheless, we must not dwell on that. Has something happened?”

Nathaniel shook his head. “Not quite. I

found a diary... It belonged to my late wife, Clara. I was not aware that she kept one until recently. Curious, I decided to read what she had written. That was when I came across an entry that spoke about a strange man accosting her with a warning. She made it clear that he was not harmful. She was not afraid, but your words were something she clearly thought about a lot. It made me remember my own encounter with you and, seeing as these incidents were only two months apart, I wondered if it was the same person, not mere coincidence.”

“So, you started to look for me.”

“Precisely.”

“There has been no other cause for worry, then, has there?” Jacob asked.

“Not that I can think of.” There was a small pause as he looked at the man.

“Will you tell me, then? All that you know? What is this business all about?”

Jacob nodded. "I will. I suppose your daughter's governess did not tell you I went to her, as well?"

Nathaniel frowned. Jacob had been to see Charlotte?

"Lady Willmington? No, she mentioned no such thing. Whatever for?"

"To warn her. She was the new mark. I did not wish to see an innocent person

harm ed.”

Charlotte had not told him about meeting any man. Was this recently? Or before things had changed between them?

“And who is this dangerous foe you warn us about, Mr. Wentworth? You said you would tell me all I need to know.”

“Yes. I also intend to keep my word.”

Jacob paused and sighed. “The enemy disguised as friend and family that I have been warning you about, Your Grace, is none other

than your dearest friend, Lord Kinsley.”

If the news had come before the revelation he had experienced the day before, Nathaniel would have immediately rebuked Wentworth. However, at a time like this, when his heart was already filled with much doubt, all he felt was shock.

One that had him reeling to a stop.

“Peter? No, it cannot be.”

Jacob also stopped. “Best believe it is, Lord Burke. Peter is a dangerous man. Now, let me tell you the story. Peter and I used to be very good friends. I am a merchant. In those days, I was very successful. I had inherited the family business and was doing my best to uphold our honor. Then, I met Peter on one of my trips. He was ... endearing. He seemed to be a nice young man, impressive, so we became fast friends. It was not long before we started doing business together. Before I knew it, my business began to fail. I could not tell how. I was doing the same thing I had been

doing for years. It simply was not working anymore. Little did I know that I was being sabotaged. Of course, I spoke with Kinsley. He had wise words of counsel and encouragement. I believed that I had found a friend indeed.”

Jacob paused to let loose another sigh. Then, he continued.

“One fateful night, a few months before Lady Burke passed, we visited the wine-house. Peter had one too many to drink. Filled with

wine, he began to talk. He spoke of treacherous things that he had done to people. I was shocked to hear of many of these things. I was most astonished to hear him speak of you.”

Nathaniel could feel it in his bones that every word Jacob was saying was the truth.

It was as clear as day. He also knew that by the time this meeting was over, his heart would have shattered into a million pieces.

So, he braced himself and prepared to take it like a man.

“What did he say?”

Jacob chuckled. It was the sad kind.

“That he was envious of you. He wanted everything you had. Your house. Your inheritance. Your family. Especially your wife, Clara. He spoke of how he had been trying to get Clara’s attention, convince her to have an affair with him. She was not yielding, he said,

but he vowed to make her. He swore he would not stop until she was his.”

Nathaniel began to shake with fury. He could not believe his ears. Peter?

Oh, but Jacob was not done.

“I knew there was still more to be learned. After hearing of how many evil deeds he had committed, I also knew for certain that I was not safe as his friend. I needed the truth. So, I made a habit of getting him drunk. When

that happened, he would spill it all. He spoke of many things. I finally learned that he was the one sabotaging my business. He also let slip that one weekend when you were away, he visited your home and continued to harass your wife. He then swore again that he would teach her a lesson for turning him away. That was when I knew I had to act.”

The weather was chilly, but Nathaniel knew his touch could burn.

“So, you went to Clara, and you warned

her.”

“Yes, I did. I could not tell her the entire truth, you see. I did not fully grasp how vile Peter was or the lengths he would go to. I was afraid he would hurt me if he found out I had exposed him.”

“But you were a stranger, and your words were obscure. Clara never took you seriously.”

Jacob nodded. “I am certain she managed rejecting his advances well. That is why when

I heard that she had died...”

“You feared that Peter had made good on his promises. It was why you wanted to be certain if the ‘flu had really taken her.”

Jacob nodded. “Precisely. So, I came to you.”

“And, like Clara, I turned you away.”

“You could not be blamed. Your pain was new. Your grief, fresh. I was simply poking at

open wounds, despite my good intentions.”

A tear slipped down Nathaniel’s face, and he wiped it away.

“It was the ‘flu. It took her life. It took Clara away from me. The physicians were certain of it.”

Jacob’s brow furrowed. “Well then, in that case, I suppose I can say that Peter is no murderer.”

That was not any consolation.

Nathaniel's mind was in a muddle. How long had it gone on for? Why had Clara never told him? Why?

“Why did you go to Charlotte? Did he say something about her as well?”

Jacob smiled. “I long since ended my friendship with Peter. However, I have kept eyes and ears open. On another drunken night, he revealed that he was furious. He said your

life was finally getting better again. He had been happy with Clara's death. Pleased with how miserable you were over the years. Too miserable to love your own daughter. He spoke of the new governess, how she was changing everything. How you were besotted with her, and how your affections were returned."

Nathaniel's eyes widened. Charlotte returned his affections! And, Peter knew this? Peter had been happy to see him in pain.

Damn the fellow!

Nathaniel's legs grew weak, and he feared they would fail him.

“I understand that this is difficult for you, but you must know, there is more.” Jacob's voice held only sadness and concern. It touched Nathaniel.

“Please, carry on. I wish to hear it all.”
He needed to know.

Jacob nodded, and then continued. “He said Eva had returned home and was happy, improving, as you were. He feared that if he did not act, you and Charlotte would get married and your life would be whole again. He also expressed how he wanted Lady Willmington for himself. He said he had learned his lesson, and this time, he would try a different method. He would cause division between you two. Then, he would swoop in and win her heart. He believed if you lost the lady, your life would crumble again. Your daughter would go back to being unhappy. He

promised he would win the lady to his side, whatever it took. Again, I feared for her life. So, I began to follow her. One day at the park, I had a chance, and I took it. I suppose she did not take me seriously, either.”

Nathaniel shut his eyes; his pain too great to bear. He had been right about Peter betraying his trust, but Charlotte had simply been another victim in his mad game.

Now, Nathaniel knew for certain that all that Peter had told him regarding Charlotte

was nothing but lies. He also surmised that Peter would have lied to Charlotte, as well.

That would explain her sudden change in attitude.

All this was too much for him to fully conceive. He needed time to learn how to deal with this magnitude of betrayal.

Clara? Charlotte?

How could he have been so blind to the

truth? How did Peter remain by his side playing the role of dutiful friend, when he only sought to bring him harm?

What sort of man could be envious of his friend, so much so that he tried to steal his wife?

His world crumbled. All this time...

“I understand that this is a lot to comprehend. I, too, was quite shocked when I learned of his evil, and I had only known him

for three years. Lord Burke, I am deeply
sorry.”

“You have done nothing except set me
free with the truth when you had no
obligation to do so. Especially after I turned
you away as I did the first time. Mr.
Wentworth, you have done my family and me
a great service. Please, allow me to repay you.
How is business now?”

“Better than ever. It took a while to
repair the damage he did, but it happened,

nonetheless.”

“I am glad to hear that. Please, when you return to England, do well to inform me. I should like to sit down with you and discuss a proposition I believe would benefit us both.”

Nathaniel put out his hand to shake the other man’s hand.

For the first time that afternoon, Jacob’s face lit with a smile. He took Nathaniel’s hand and shook it firmly.

“I shall look forward to that, very much.

However, you must know this. You owe me nothing. It is simply what I wish someone had done for me.”

“You are a good man, Mr. Wentworth.

Undoubtedly, the kind of friend I should be keeping. I will never forget this kindness, ever. You have saved my life. My gratitude knows no bounds.”

“I assure you; the pleasure is mine.”

Managing to find a smile, Nathaniel spoke again, “Until your return then, farewell.”

“Farewell, Lord Burke.”

With those words, they let go of each other’s hands, and Jacob turned to walk away. Nathaniel remained where he was, staring at the man until he vanished into the crowd.

That was when he turned around to return to his own carriage. As he did, he

announced to the coachman, “Take me back to Wimsley. There is something I must do.”

Chapter 30

The book was a great one. Charlotte knew this. In times before, whenever she sat with a book as intriguing as this one, her mind rarely strayed.

So, why could she not stop thinking about Nathaniel? He had left early that morning for London. For the life of her, she could not imagine what could have been so urgent.

After thinking about it long and hard, she had decided to speak to him concerning Peter's behavior. She was a member of the staff in this household, and her employer's friend made her feel uncomfortable.

She worried that Peter would not stop his advances. If that turned out to be the case, she was not certain she could stay here any longer.

She had seen the look on his face the day before, and she no longer believed him

harmless. Heavens knew what he was capable of. She did not want to wait to find out.

Also, the words of that strange man she had met at the park kept coming back to her. She had not thought of him in weeks, until the incident at the river.

He had said the foe was disguised as a friend close to the family.

Peter perfectly fit the description, and with what she had seen, she was inclined to

believe that he was the one. She did not know how Nathaniel would take it all, considering their broken relationship.

Still, she had made up her mind and knew that there was no going back.

Not knowing when Nathaniel would return unsettled her. In the meanwhile, she only hoped that Peter would stay away.

The door to the drawing room opened then. She looked up to see the shadow

looming in the dark, and she just knew that Peter was there.

So much for hope.

She straightened in her seat, steeling her resolve to deal with him as he staggered in.

“There you are ... I told you we were not done with our conversation. I promised you I would be back for you.”

Something was wrong. He was moving

awkwardly, and there was a slur to his words.

She rose to her feet, alarmed.

That was when she sniffed it. The smell of alcohol in the air. Peter was drunk.

Goodness.

“Nathaniel is not home,” she said, her voice firm.

“Oh, I know. I am not here for him. I am here for you. You did not think you could rid

yourself of me that easily, did you? I warned you, Charlotte. I told you that you will be mine.”

He reached her then and grabbed her hands.

Charlotte yelped. She had not expected that. Her bravado was beginning to fail her. Peter was not in his right senses. She did not wish to be hurt.

His grip on her wrist tightened, and the

pain sunk into her bones.

“Peter ... let me go. You are hurting me.”

“Never!”

His eyes were crazed. Whether it was the alcohol, the rage, or both. All she knew was that this man was dangerous, and she must get away from him.

He looked her over, his blue eyes growing darker with every second. When he

was done, he started to walk back to the door, dragging her along.

He was too powerful for her. She tried to break free, but she could not. His grip was very tight.

“Peter, listen to me. You are drunk. This is not you. We can talk things over, reach an agreement. Peter, you need to rest your head. You are not in the right state of mind!”

“I am done talking! And I am perfectly

fine! This is me, Charlotte! This is who I am.
You have no idea what I am capable of, but
you will come to learn.”

“Peter, please. Surely, we can ... Where
are you taking me?”

“Somewhere far away.”

Charlotte looked around, knowing she
had to think and act fast. Peter was a known
face. He came and went as he wished. There
must be someone outside of this drawing

room. One of the servants, anyone who could help her.

She just had to shout for help.

“Help! Is anyone there? Anybody? Help!”

Peter rocked to a stop. When he turned, there was thunder in his eyes.

“Do not tempt me, Willmington. I do not wish to hurt you.”

Tired of the fear, she chose anger instead.

How dare he? How could he do this to her?

What right did he have?

She looked at her wrist where he held her. She was certain bruises would have formed. It was late in the evening, and the only gas lamp lit in the room did not afford much lighting.

“You have already hurt me. Stop this madness, Peter. I demand you let me go this instant, or you shall pay dearly for it!”

She held his gaze, dauntless, even as her chest rose and fell with heavy breaths. For a moment, she caught a somber look and hoped he had returned to his senses.

What happened next revealed he was nowhere close. He dissolved into abrupt maniacal laughter. One that sent chills into her bones.

“What was that supposed to do, dear Charlotte? Work like magic? You might be

Eva's fairy godmother, but we both know this is no fantasy."

He started to walk again, dragging her.

This time, Charlotte cried louder.

"Help me!"

"Charlotte?" A voice called back. It was Nathaniel's. She would know that voice anywhere. He was back! He was here! He would save her!

“Nathan! In the drawing room! Com...”

she did not finish the words. Peter stopped again, spinning to clamp his free hand over her mouth.

Charlotte struggled to speak, but all that came out were muffled sounds.

A clever idea suddenly came into her mind, and, just as she was about to execute it, Nathaniel appeared by the open door.

“Peter!”

The anger in his voice was unmistakable. Charlotte could not remember a time when she had ever seen Nathaniel so furious.

With purposeful strides, he crossed the distance between them and landed a neat blow on Peter's chin.

The blow rocked Peter off balance, and, as he fell to the floor, he let Charlotte go. Immediately, Nathaniel rushed to embrace her.

“Charlotte? Dear goodness, are you all right?”

She let the tears flow as she held onto him as if for dear life, sweet relief washing over her. Nathaniel was here. She was safe!

The embrace ended too soon, but he continued to touch her face and shoulders, looking for signs of injuries.

“Did he hurt you?”

She nodded. “Only my wrist. His grip was too tight. He said he was taking me to somewhere far away. Nathan, there is something you should know about Peter. He is...”

Just then, she saw Peter coming for Nathaniel with a statue in his hand, arms raised to hit.

“Nathan! Look out!”

Before Nathan could turn, someone else hit Peter, and he fell to the ground again. Wide-eyed, Charlotte raised her head to see who it was.

The face was unfamiliar, but she recognized the uniform.

Just then, more men piled into the drawing room. Frederick came in with two more gas lamps, and they could all suddenly see more clearly.

That was when Nathaniel took her hand
and saw the bruise.

“He will pay for this!” he swore.

Charlotte marveled at his anger ... anger
on her behalf. Her head was starting to hurt.
So many things were happening, and she
could not comprehend the whirl of events.

“Is this the man?” one of the uniformed
men asked.

“Yes, constable,” Nathan responded.

“That is Peter Kinsley. I caught him assaulting Lady Willmington. That alone is enough to have him locked up for the night.”

Charlotte feared she would faint. She shook her head, struggling to stay standing.

“What is going on, Nathaniel? Why are you here with the constable and his men? Where have you been all day?”

Nathaniel sighed.

“It is a long story, and I will tell you.

First, you must tell me what just happened
and ...”

He paused as his mother entered the
room.

“What in the heavens is happening here?

I was woken by the commotion. So was Eva. I
feared a thief had gotten in. Oh my, is that
Peter? Why is he bound by the constable’s
boys?”

Nathaniel heaved a sigh.

“Mother, there is much you must know.

Peter is not who we thought he was. First, we must listen to Charlotte.”

He looked back at her then, and she nodded.

“I will tell you everything.”

She waited until they found chairs ...

except for Peter and the constable's men.

When they were all settled, she began to talk.

She started from the night of Eva's ball, explaining how Peter had tried to worm himself into her good graces from then until the day before at the river, when he had tried to kiss her and resorted to threats when she had refused. Finally, she told them of how he had attacked her that night and all that had happened until Nathaniel came to her rescue.

The shock on everyone's face was

evident, but Nathaniel let them know that was not all.

Then, he went ahead to tell his own tale. Starting from three years ago at Clara's funeral. How he had found the diary and begun to search for the mystery man.

“That is strange. I was warned, too. A few months since ... at the park! I was going to tell you, but I assumed it was a silly jest. When I heard nothing again, I had cause to believe it was naught to worry about.”

Nathaniel nodded. "I know, Charlotte. Jacob told me everything."

"Jacob?" she and the duchess said at the same time.

"Yes. Mr. Jacob Wentworth, the mystery man."

Everyone listened quietly, riveted, and astonished at the same time as Nathaniel told it all. How he had found Mr. Wentworth and

all that he had learned from him.

“I returned to Wimsley right away. A part of me just knew I would find Peter here. If he really was what Jacob said he was, then he would want to take advantage of my absence to woo you. I was right. When I heard you screaming for help as I arrived ...” he paused and swallowed hard.

“I feared the worst had happened... I am glad I came here in time. In light of the truth, I cannot put it past Peter to kidnap you. This

man has so much hate in his heart and, for years, he has mastered the art of hiding it well. He fooled us all. Well, no more! He told you I had my eyes set on other women?”

Nathaniel scoffed.

“He told me you had no interest in marriage, much less being my wife. He said your greatest joy and life’s ambition was to be a governess. He claimed you knew of my feelings for you, and I would deny you what you truly wanted. That is why you began to keep your distance.”

Charlotte could not believe her ears. Each time she thought she could not be more surprised; she was proven wrong.

“What? That is absurd. We never had such discussions.”

“I am aware. Just as I never flirted with any of those women. I was simply being polite, but they all knew where they stood. The times I was away, I was trying to find Mr. Wentworth and address the problems with the

business and the village.”

For a long time, no one said a thing.

What could they say? The news was more than enough to render anyone incapable of speech.

Charlotte turned to look at the villain in question. Such an evil man.

Finally, Lady Burke broke the spell, rising to her feet.

“Is it true, Peter? Is all that has been said

here tonight the truth? Don't you lie to me. I know it is. I just want to hear you say it. So, tell me. Tell me you did all you have been accused of!"

"Oh yes, I did!" Peter shouted in response. "What else was I supposed to do? Hold my peace while I watched him have the perfect life? The perfect wife? The perfect family?"

"You ... you insolent fool! You are a man of noble birth just as he! Younger still! You

could have had your own wife, your own family. You refused to settle down and get married! No one else is responsible for all the things you lack in your life except you!”

Nathaniel rose to his feet to go to his mother’s side. “Mother ... you need not trouble yourself with this.”

“Oh, let me be, Nathaniel! I am fine and still have another score of years left in me. Let me speak with this traitor! Kinsley, you could have had it all at the snap of your fingers.

Instead of building your castle, you sought to tear down another's. A man who took you as his own brother. A family who saw you as one of their own. You are a disappointment, and I never want to see your face again. Take him away!"

The men started to obey. As they did, Peter yelled again.

"You do not deserve everything you got so easily. I should have been the man for Clara! I would have made her happier."

Nathaniel charged after him, his fists ready. Charlotte shot out of her chair, reaching him in time to stop him with a hand to his shoulder.

“Don’t, Nathaniel. He is not worth it! It is over now. We have his confession. We know the truth. He will not hurt us anymore.”

She felt the anger leave him at her words. Then, he turned to her.

“I still cannot believe he did all those horrendous things.”

Charlotte sighed. “Not can I”

Nathaniel took her hands again, holding her gaze. Now that the fear, panic, anger, and confusion were gone, she could feel it once more.

Her heart was beating for him. Her body was trembling at his touch.

“I am so sorry he hurt you.”

“Do not be. You had no part in it.”

“Oh, but I did. He only came after you because, in the end, it was me he really wanted to hurt. I feel so foolish for believing his lies, for letting him come between us. He knew of our feelings for each other. I confided in him, trusted him ... and all he did was pull us apart.”

Tears filled her eyes yet again. Nathaniel

looked so torn. She wanted to hug him tightly and hold him forever.

“I was foolish, as well. I, too, believed his lies. We must not dwell on the past, Nathaniel. What we have is now, and the future to look forward to. We never have to worry about Peter again. Never.”

It was Nathaniel's turn to sigh.

“I suppose you are right. You should know, Charlotte, I am in love with you. I have

loved you for some time now.”

This was it. The moment Charlotte had been waiting for and dreamed of all her life. It was finally here.

Nathaniel loved her, and he was saying it out loud for everyone who cared to hear. This was what happiness felt like. A kind she had never experienced before.

“Oh, Nathaniel ... I am in love with you, too. I have been for some time. I cannot

believe we wasted all those precious moments staying away from each other.”

“No dwelling in the past, remember? We have now and the future. A future I know, without doubt in my heart, I do not want to spend without you.”

As if the evening could not get any more surprising, Nathaniel went down on one knee in that moment.

“Charlotte, I am aware that there remains

a lot to be sorted out. However, one thing is clear; I love you, and you love me. You are an amazing, wonderful woman, and I know I want you in my life forever, taking each day as it comes and choosing to belong together every moment. That is why ... I'm asking you to marry me. Make me the happiest man. Be my wife.”

After the ordeal she had just suffered, Charlotte knew she could not be dreaming, not this time. This was real. It was happening.

“Oh, Nathaniel. Yes. Yes, I will marry you!” How could she not?

He rose to his feet then and took her lips in a kiss, sealing the promise they had just made to each other. As they pulled away, Eva appeared at the door, Cecilia by her side.

“Are the bad men gone?” she asked, wide-eyed.

It was Lady Burke who answered, “Yes, sweetheart. All gone. Come in. There is

something you must know.”

She opened her arms wide, all smiles, not the barest hint of the hurt and anger she had been feeling only moments ago.

Eva ran into her arms, and she lifted the child up. Then, she leaned in towards her ears and whispered.

As she pulled away, Eva squealed in happiness.

“Is it true? Father, you are marrying Lady Willmington? She is going to be my mother?”

Her excitement was evident, catching.

Charlotte and Nathaniel broke into happy laughter. When Lady Burke brought the child to them, they both took her into their arms.

It was Nathaniel who spoke first. “Yes, sweetling. Lady Willmington has agreed to marry me.”

“I am going to become your mother, my

dear. I hope I have your blessings,” Charlotte added.

Eva’s joy knew no bounds. “Of course, you do! I have been waiting for this for so long. Finally! We shall be one happy family.”

Just like that, everything else was forgotten. All that was there was joy and love and laughter.

As they threw arms around each other in one big embrace, Charlotte knew without a

doubt that this was where she was always
meant to be.

Every moment of her life had brought her
to this place, these people.

Home.

Epilogue

Charlotte stood looking at herself in the mirror. Three times before, she had seen her sisters dressed all in white. Each time, her chest had tightened, wishing for the day that she might, too, while knowing that it was never going to happen.

Now here she was, getting married to the man of her dreams.

After accepting Nathaniel's proposal, she had agreed to have the wedding the following

spring. So, they had waited four months, which they spent making preparations.

Her sisters had been amazed to receive the news. They had written letters expressing their happiness, and, just a week before, they had all arrived with their families for the wedding.

A short while ago, they had all been here in the room with her, making a fuss over everything. Lady Burke had to send them away, so that Charlotte would have time to

herself, to take this moment in and consider what it meant to her.

Charlotte was floating on clouds. That was the only word for it. Her life was perfect. She was going to spend the rest of her life with the most wonderful people on earth.

Her sisters were happy in their homes and her father... Nathaniel had made good on his promises. He had helped mend the rift between Charlotte and her father.

The reconciliation had not been easy, but it had happened. That was why he was there today to walk her down the aisle.

Her heart was filled with so much happiness, she feared it might burst. She had it all.

A knock sounded on the door, and she called out to whoever it was.

“You may enter.”

She kept her back turned as the door opened and footfalls sounded behind her.

Lady Burke and her father came to stand by her side, and together, they looked into the mirror to behold her.

It was her father who spoke first, his voice teary. “Oh dear, you look so beautiful. I think I might cry.”

His words touched Charlotte, warming her from the inside. She leaned up to place a

kiss on his cheek.

“Don’t cry now, Father. If you do, then I shall, too, and I will ruin my face.”

“Ah ... true.” Quickly, he regained himself and smiled at her. Charlotte smiled in return.

“You did a wonderful job, Charlotte. Raising your sisters, putting their future before yours. It is only right that God has blessed you so.”

Lady Burke spoke then. “I believe this was all meant to be. From the start. If you had chosen one of those numerous suitors after your debut, you would never have become a governess.”

“And I never would have met you, Eva, ... Nathaniel. I do not think I would be as happy as I am now with anyone else. This is where I have always belonged.”

Lady Burke smiled. “There are many

times in life when we do not understand things as they happen. But we must believe that there is a reason for all, and one day, it will all make sense as the pieces fall into place.”

Charlotte nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. If she had never lost her mother, she never would have had to raise her sisters, to put their needs before hers.

If Nathaniel had never lost Clara...

Both losses were painful, and they had both suffered because of them. However, God helped them to find each other, and now that she was here, she prayed to never leave.

“Thank you, Ophelia.”

Ophelia’s face widened in a warm smile.

“We have made progress. Soon, I hope to be called *Mother*.”

“Soon,” was Charlotte’s response.

Just then, someone else appeared by the door.

“Everyone is seated and waiting! They are ready to meet the bride!” The tiny voice chimed.

Charlotte turned around then, causing her father and Ophelia to do the same.

Her eyes twinkled as she looked at the child that would soon be hers in truth. Eva had grown even more beautiful. She was like a

whole new person, entirely different from the girl Charlotte had met almost a year ago.

Charlotte had decided Eva would throw her flowers in church. The child was dressed in a beautiful coral gown. Soft and pretty, looking absolutely lovely.

As Eva saw Charlotte for the first time since she had finished getting dressed, her jaw dropped, and her eyes widened.

“Father is going to be knocked off his

heels when he sees you! You look marvelous, Charlotte. I am so happy that you are going to be my mother.”

Charlotte felt her cheeks grow warm, and she wondered how she was going to get through the day with a red face.

“Thank you, Eva. You look absolutely beautiful as well, and I am honored to be your mother.”

“Well then, Mother ... shall we get on

with this? I do not think I can wait much longer.”

Charlotte’s heart stopped. Eva had just called her *Mother*. It was the first time anyone had called her by that word.

She closed her eyes to savor the moment, to keep it safe. When her lashes fluttered apart, she knew that this memory was one she would never forget. It would forever be cherished.

She had no words, not now, but she hoped Eva could see and feel all the love she had for her.

She turned to Ophelia, then to her father.

“Are you ready?” her father asked.

“It is time,” Ophelia declared.

She took a deep breath in and exhaled.

“Yes. I am ready.”

At those words, they all walked out of the castle.

Ah, yes. They had come to Peltney Castle for the wedding. Nathaniel had spent the last three months having one wing renovated, so they could stay there for a few days.

The guests were all seated by the sea. It was where she and Nathaniel would finally be joined in marriage.

Everyone that meant something to them

had been invited.

Family, business associates, friends.

Charlotte gasped as she beheld the sight.

The view was ... magical.

Ophelia smiled, understanding. Then she embraced and kissed Charlotte and went to join the congregation.

Eva kissed her, as well, and, with her basket of flowers, she began to walk gracefully

down the aisle, dropping beautiful petals for Charlotte to march on.

The congregation rose, and the band started to play. She shared another moment with her father and an understanding passed between them. Together, they took the first step towards the rest of her life.

As they started to go down the aisle, Charlotte looked up, searching for the man who owned her heart.

There he was, waiting for her. More handsome than ever. There was such joy and love in his eyes, and they convinced her all the more that this was indeed meant to be.

He took her hand as her father handed her over. They held each other's eyes, vowing a lifetime to one another.

When the vicar joined them as one, they sealed all those promises with a kiss.

“I love you, Charlotte. So much. I always

will,” Nathaniel whispered as they pulled apart.

Smiling up at him, knowing that she would never stop loving him, she replied, “I love you, Nathaniel. Forever and always.”

“Ladies and Lords, I give you, Lord and Lady Burke!”

At the vicar’s announcement, the crowd went wild with cheers. Together, Charlotte and Nathaniel faced them and charged into

the beautiful future that awaited them with
hope, faith, and love.

The Extended Epilogue

I want to thank you with all my heart for reading my novel **“The Mystery of the Broken Duke”!**

Would you like a sneak peek in Charlotte and Nathaniel’s future?

Click on the image or the link below to connect to a more personal level and as a **BONUS**, I will send you the Extended Epilogue of this Book!



<https://BookHip.com/JRGMWN>

If you liked the collection I would be
honored if you could post your **review!**

A Duke's Relentless Courting-Preview

Prologue

Her mother was dying. Lydia could smell the fear like a tangible fog hanging in the air. She crouched in the corner near the hearth listening to her mother's labored breathing coming from the bed. She held her younger sister, Eleanor, close to her chest. At ten years old, Lydia was the brave one. Or, at least, she had to pretend to be brave for Eleanor's sake.

Quiet sobs came from her father's hunched form as he leaned over the bed. He held onto his wife's hand with a vice-like grip, as though this

action alone could keep her from leaving them.

“Don’t leave us, my love,” he pleaded, his tears soaking the bedsheets. “We need you. Please don’t leave us.”

His pleas frightened Lydia. The girls had been alone for most of this terrible year. When the doctor had diagnosed their mother with a fatal disease, their father had crumpled to the floor. It was a death sentence. Watching the months of agony that their mother had to endure was even harder.

Doctor Sanders arrived, summoned by their father. He gave the girls a quick glance and then went to their mother's bedside. Lydia watched their father stand, looking as if he might tumble to the floor any second. It scared her to see him so vulnerable. She stood and joined her father at the bedside, watching the doctor examine her mother. The doctor turned with sadness etched in his old, lined face.

"I'm so sorry. She's gone, my lord."

Lydia's world started spinning. She heard her father crumple to the floor, his sobs muted in her ringing ears. It couldn't be. Her mother had been so beautiful and so full of life just a short year ago. A mother was supposed to be there to help and guide her children. Now, more than ever, Lydia felt alone, but she squared her shoulders when she saw her sister crying uncontrollably by the hearth. Lydia went to her and held her close. Eleanor was only six years old; she would never really know or remember their mother. Lydia would have to protect and guide her now.

The doctor came over to the two of them and knelt, so that he could meet them eye to eye. “I am so sorry for your loss, my dear girls. Your mother was such a gentle and caring woman. Would you like to say your last goodbyes? I’ll go to the bed with you if you like.”

The door creaked open, and Lydia saw the governess peek her head inside. She turned back to the doctor.

“No, thank you, sir. We will be all right.

Thank you for all that you have done for our mother,” she replied. He nodded sadly and stood, leaving the room. The governess came over to the girls and took their hands, leading them to the bed.

Lydia looked at her mother’s peaceful face. At last, her struggles were over. She touched the hand that was quickly growing cold with the absence of life. Lydia pulled her hand away.

“Goodbye, Mother,” she whispered and turned away. She knelt next to her father and

placed a hand on his shoulder. He shrugged her off.

“Leave me,” he said. “Leave us!” He stood and shouted at the three of them. Lydia jumped. Her father had never shouted at them before.

“Yes, Father,” she said, her voice shaking. She placed a protective arm around Eleanor’s shoulders and left the room, the governess following closely behind them.

Lydia awoke with a start, the sound of a

door closing awakening her from the dream. Tears wet her cheeks at the painful memories. It had been ten years since her mother's untimely death. Lydia lay back on her pillows, her blonde curls framing her face. The dreams of her mother's death had plagued her ever since that fateful night. But life had returned to a semblance of normalcy, even if it had taken years. Slowly but surely, her father had found his way back to the land of the living.

Eleanor was now sixteen and full of life. She looked very much like their mother. Lydia

felt a responsibility for her sister, trying to raise her as she thought her mother would have wanted. For many years after their mother's death, her father had barely been able to function. Lydia had had to grow up very quickly as a result.

She folded the coverlet back and swung her legs out of bed, allowing her bare feet to brush the cool, wooden floor. She padded over to the window and moved the sheer white curtains aside. The sun was just beginning to rise.

“A perfect day for a ride, I think,” she said to herself. She went to the door connecting her room to her sister’s and quietly turned the knob. Eleanor was still fast asleep. She ran over to the bed and jumped onto the plush coverlet.

“What?!” Eleanor shot up, confused by the rude awakening. When she saw her sister’s face beside her, she fell back on the pillows laughing. “My goodness, Lydia. Will you ever grow up?”

“I suppose I will have to someday, but you will always be my sister. I do so enjoy surprising you in the morning,” Lydia teased. She lay down next to her sister and looked up at the ceiling.

“I have never understood why you need to wake at the break of dawn every morning,” Eleanor replied, her voice muffled under the covers. Lydia tore them off, laughing at Eleanor’s groans. She curled up into a ball and turned away from Lydia.

“Waking early is good for you. You’d sleep the whole day away if I let you. It’s a beautiful day for a ride, let’s plan one for this afternoon,” Lydia suggested.

Eleanor turned over and stretched, her arms raised above her head, “Fine. But I get to choose where we ride.”

“Very well. We that’s agreed, then,” Lydia said. She jumped out of bed and went back to her own room to begin getting ready

for the day.

Eleanor met her downstairs for breakfast, and, as usual, their father ignored the girls' laughter as he read his newspaper. "Lord Beckett is coming in a few minutes, my dears. It might be nice if you could stay to say hello to him," their father instructed, as they made their way out of the breakfast room.

"Yes, Father," they replied, almost in unison. They looked at each other, knowing what a visit from Lord Beckett meant.

“I do wish Father would come out riding with us sometimes. He seems so lonely and, well, old,” Eleanor said, chuckling, even though the observation would have hurt her father’s feelings if he had heard.

“He’s endured a lot in the last ten years. He loved Mother very much,” Lydia said, trying to defend him. She did not want Eleanor to have a bad opinion of their father, even though sometimes she wished her father would show more interest in their lives. He

worried over them, she knew, but that was not the same as being present.

Lydia linked her arm through Eleanor's and steered them towards the stairs leading to the second floor of their country mansion. She loved this home in the country, just west of London. Their fortune had declined after her mother's death, but her father had managed to hold on to the house, selling off small portions of land from the estate. She could only hope that her father would now be able to restore their fortune. If he could not, then they would

soon have to part with the country house as well and move into town permanently.

They passed their mother's old room on the way down the hall. It had been locked since the day of the funeral. The memories floated around it in an air of mystery, like ghosts from a time that they all wished could be forgotten. They hurried past the room quietly, as was their habit.

Someday, perhaps, if their fortunes were restored, Lydia would renovate the room as a

sort of memorial to her mother. It had never sat well with her that it remained closed, as if the angel of death had been allowed to stay all these years. She knew her father had never really faced his grief, only pushed it down deep inside to escape it.

She shook her head at the thought, returning to the present. She pasted a smile on her face and returned her attention to her sister, who was chattering away about some fairytale queen they had read about. Lydia left Eleanor outside her room and continued to her

own door.

A half-hour later, they were back downstairs, having changed into their riding habits. They waited for Lord Beckett to arrive, while their father remained absorbed in his newspaper. Lydia suspected he was trying to marry her off to Lord Beckett's son, but she would not be forced into a loveless marriage. Lord Beckett's son was a vain, preening peacock.

“Hello, my friend. How good of you to

come,” her father stood as Lord Beckett was announced and shown into the sun-filled room.

“Good to see you again, my old friend,” Lord Beckett replied jovially. Lydia thought he was a kind man, the exact opposite of his son. She would not have minded being his daughter-in-law if his son had proved more worthy. “How long will you grace us with your presence this time?”

“We are only here for a fortnight,” her

father replied, shaking his old friend's hand.

“Very good. And my, what beautiful young ladies your daughters have grown into!” Lord Beckett exclaimed, bowing slightly to them. They curtsied and smiled.

“Thank you, sir,” Lydia replied. “It is always a joy to receive you. We will leave you and Father to converse.”

Eleanor smiled but said nothing, as she was somewhat shy around strangers. They left

the room just as their father ordered brandy poured for him and Lord Beckett. Lydia rolled her eyes. Everyone knew that Lord Beckett was a great lover of brandy and racehorses. She only hoped he would not drink their father under the table.

“Come on,” Lydia said as they walked outside, her arms spread out towards the sun. “I’m ready to feel the wind in my hair.”

“You’re such a romantic, you know that, don’t you?” Eleanor teased.

“As are you,” Lydia shot back.

They mounted their steeds, while two stable boys held the reins for them.

“Tell Father we shall be back before teatime,” Lydia instructed the butler.

“Yes, my lady,” he replied, bowing as they spurred their steeds to a gallop and raced down the drive.

“You said you wanted to choose where we rode today. Which way?” Lydia asked.

“This way.” Eleanor pointed towards the river and took the lead, spurring her horse into a canter. Lydia followed suit, relishing being outdoors. She had always hated being cooped up inside.

They rode along at a great clip for about half a mile, until they came to the river. When they reached its banks, they slowed to enjoy the birds singing in the tree branches. Spring

was in full bloom, and Lydia was gazing at all the colors around her when Eleanor's horse suddenly startled.

“Whoa, girl! Whoa!” Eleanor yelled. Her voice was anything but soothing, further scaring her mount. Lydia tried to grab the reins as the horse reared, but her sister was too far away.

The horse raced down the riverbank at a terrifying speed. It was all Eleanor could do to hang on. Lydia spurred her horse into a gallop,

trying to catch up with the spooked animal.

“Whoa, girl!” Lydia called after the them, but to no avail. Without warning, the ground beneath Eleanor’s horse gave way. The horse squealed as it lost its footing, taking Eleanor with it. Lydia screamed as she watched her sister plunge towards the rushing river. Spring had brought heavy rains, and the river was swollen with them. If Eleanor fell in with her feet still stuck in the stirrup, she would be lost.

Lydia urged her horse to go even faster,

trying to reach her sister before it was too late. Eleanor's foot came loose from the stirrup, and she fell backward. Her horse rolled into the river and started swimming as best it could towards the opposite bank. But Eleanor lay still, her back bent over a boulder near the river's edge. Lydia dismounted and hurried down to her sister, her feet slipping in the mud.

“Eleanor! Eleanor!” she cried. Eleanor wasn't moving, and for a moment, Lydia feared the worst. But when she reached her

sister, Lydia could see that she was still breathing. She grasped her hand, afraid to move her.

“Lydia?” Eleanor whispered, her breath coming in labored gasps.

“Yes, I’m here. You’re going to be fine,” Lydia said.

Eleanor looked up at the sky, “I can’t feel my legs.”

Lydia brushed the hair away from her face. “Don’t worry. Everything is going to be well. Can you sit up?”

Tears were streaming down the sides of Eleanor’s cheeks. She shook her head slightly, “No. I can’t move. Oh, Lydia! Help me!”

Lydia gasped, “It’s all right. I’m going to get help.”

Eleanor grasped her hand even tighter, “Don’t leave me!” she screamed in terror.

Lydia bent back down and cupped Eleanor's face between her hands, "Look at me. I'm going to ride back to the house and get help and send for a doctor. I'll come back immediately; I promise you. Have I ever let you down?"

Eleanor calmed a little. "No. You've never let me down."

Lydia nodded, "Very well then. Don't try to move. We don't want you to injure yourself

further.” She gave Eleanor’s hand a small squeeze, which Eleanor returned weakly.

Lydia clawed her way up the riverbank, an even more difficult task than coming down. By the time she reached the top, she was covered in mud from head to toe. She caught hold of the reins and, with one fluid motion, mounted the powerful steed. She gave her sister one last glance, making sure she was still breathing. Eleanor nodded her head slightly.

“I’ll be back very soon! Hold on,

Eleanor!” she called, then turned the horse and raced back to the mansion, tears streaming down her face all the way. Lydia had asked Eleanor if she had ever let her down. Well, today had been the first time she had done just that.

Chapter 1

ONE YEAR LATER

Christopher Beaumont, Duke of Hamilton, stared out of the window in boredom. He massaged his fingers over his temples, disturbing his dark brown hair. He tried to remain calm, an ever-increasing hardship when it came to his mother's meddling.

“Oh, Mother, do you never tire of pestering me?”

Christopher's mother Priscilla found it necessary to remind him, for the hundredth time, about his stepfather's birthday party. After his father's death many years ago, his mother had married Lord Victor Clarkson. He was a good sort of fellow, and they had found a way to get along over the years, having the annoyance of dealing with Christopher's mother as common ground. Victor sat quietly with his newspaper in hand, trying to gain a few moments peace, while his mother continued her lecture.

“My dear, I only want to remind you who is attending. Many eligible young ladies will be coming, and it is high time you found a wife,” Priscilla persisted. “Why, only this morning I received a note from Lady Felicia Dodsworth. It said that she and the earl will be coming, along with their three daughters. Surely you remember the earl and his wife?”

“I have not the slightest recollection or care for the earl, Mother. As I have tried to tell you countless times, I am not inclined towards

courtship or marriage.”

“And, oh yes, Lady Wessel with her two daughters and son will be in attendance,” his mother went on, as if she had not even heard him. “It is a pity the younger of her daughters is so shy, for she could have men flocking to her if she were more outgoing. The older sister makes up for her reticence with good spirits, although she is admittedly not as pretty. Many other young ladies might catch your fancy if you only give them a chance.”

“Mother, please!” Christopher interrupted, his brown eyes flashing. He was tired of her babbling. “I do not want to attend. Lord Clarkson knows I wish him all the best on his birthday, but I have no need to attend every lavish event you put on. I want to be left alone. I cannot bear to sit through another one of your tiresome dinners, surrounded by titled fools and preposterous businessmen. It is all vanity and deceit.”

His mother looked at him in horror. One might think he was holding the head of a

decapitated buck in the middle of her parlor, dripping gore all over the rugs. He rolled his eyes. Her dramatics were wearing on his nerves.

“How can you say such a thing?” She went to her husband and grabbed his arm as if for support. Lord Clarkson also rolled his eyes, but he was stuck with the woman of his own volition. He patted her hand half-heartedly.

“They all insist on asking me what I am going to do with my life and think it their

duty to give me advice. They say I should start a business venture, as if writing were not a worthy use of my time. Or they tell me I must marry a well-off lady to increase our family wealth. As if we were not wealthy enough already. No,” he shook his head. “If I am to increase my wealth, it will be through my own pursuits. Many peers have become acclaimed writers. Why shouldn’t I?”

His mother huffed at him in exasperation. “How many works have you sold? No one wants to read the high-minded

ramblings of a philosopher these days. You should turn your hand to fiction, romance. You would have a much broader readership.”

“Sell my soul to the devil? Never!”

Christopher said, slicing the air with his hand. He straightened to his full height, a towering six feet, two inches. “I write what I write because it has meaning and substance. Your romance novels do nothing but numb the brain and turn silly girls into even sillier women.”

“That is why people say you are rude, my dear. You cannot be so blunt,” his mother rose and came to his side. Before she could grab his hand, he backed away from her.

“I don’t care if they think I’m rude. I will not be drawn into their manipulative games,” he retorted. He started to leave the room, tired of her prodding.

“Please, I beg you to reconsider. How will it look if you are not at your own stepfather’s birthday celebration? If you won’t

come for my sake, then at least come for his. I know you two have become close over the years. Tell him, Victor,” his mother pleaded, trying to pull her husband into the argument.

“Let the boy alone, Priscilla. If he does not want to attend, you cannot force him,” Victor said, nodding at his stepson.

Christopher had always appreciated that Victor had not tried to assert any authority over him. He had never attempted to replace Christopher’s father, and, in his own time, Christopher had willingly accepted Victor into

his life. He saw him as an ally against his mother's railings.

Christopher left the room without another word, retiring to the sanctuary of his study. He sat down at his desk with a sigh. His mother had become very overbearing after his father had passed away. His father, an Italian noble, had always hated England, with its near-constant rain and dull ruling class. He had been a good father to Christopher, however, taking him to his home country many times before his death when Christopher

was sixteen. Ever since that day, Christopher had been forced to deal with the brunt of his mother's idiosyncrasies.

Her overbearing nature drove people to dislike her, fear her, or love her. She was a force of nature. It made him laugh sometimes, watching how she felt the need to order everyone's lives. It had also become an increasing burden to him over the last few years, and her constant badgering had made him short-tempered. He wondered if she was becoming senile, often repeating stories and

introducing him to people he had already met.
Or was she just too focused on herself and her own selfish desires to remember?

He looked at his reflection in the mirror hanging to his right. He had inherited his father's dark complexion and brown eyes, as well as his thirst for knowledge. How his father and mother had been matched was a mystery that Christopher would never understand.

“Christopher?” his mother peeked her

head around the door. He sighed and covered his face with his hand.

“What is it, Mother?” he asked, exasperated. She was not going to give up until he agreed to attend the birthday celebration.

She came into the room, mistaking his question for an invitation. He stood, ready to resume the fight.

“I wish you would reconsider. I know

that Victor does not seem as though he would be hurt by your not attending, but I know him better than you do. It would crush him. Please, can't you come, for his sake?" His mother clasped her hands in front of her heart as if she were pleading for her life rather than a silly party.

He sighed. He knew his stepfather better than his mother did. How could a woman be so blind? But she was right about one thing. Victor would want him there, if only as an ally. Victor often found her parties dull, as

well. Sometimes the pair of them even hid from their guests, retiring to the private smoking room for a drink and a quiet game of chess.

“Very well. If you think it means that much to him,” he said, finally relenting, if only to be rid of her, so he could have some peace and quiet.

“Oh, thank you, my boy!” she said. She turned and readied to leave, “I know he will be forever grateful to you.” She left the room

in a flurry, and Christopher closed his eyes, relishing the quiet. He went back around his desk, staring at the blank page of his new manuscript. He growled in frustration.

“Perhaps I should marry and be done with it, just so Mother will leave me alone,” he whispered to himself. But he was not one to marry for advantage. Nor even for love. He was much too level-headed for that. “No, I shall never marry.” He said, louder this time. His one passion was writing, and that was how it always would be.

On the night of the party, Christopher arrived as late as was possible without appearing rude. The birthday celebration was being held at Vauxhall Gardens, a favorite party venue. He detested playing the host, greeting everyone as they filed into the gardens. He had waited until almost everyone arrived, and then made his appearance, hiding among the guests streaming into the venue. He was not able to hide for long. His mother soon spotted him in a lonely corner near a copse of

trees. She took his arm and began introducing him to every single one of the guests, even the ones he had met before.

“My dear, you remember Lord and Lady Rushton, don’t you?” she asked, her smile reaching almost to her ears. They had a daughter if he remembered correctly.

“Yes, Mother. You’ve introduced us about twelve times already,” he said, bored out of his mind. He gave them a cold nod.

“Ahh, yes,” she continued, hardly pausing to draw breath, “Well, you know that they were with us last April, in Venice? At the opera?”

Christopher let her babble on. She had told the same story the last time she introduced them, and the time before that. He let his mind wander, thinking about the next step he needed to take on his manuscript. After fifteen minutes of his mother’s prattle, he excused himself, not waiting for her reply. He walked towards one of the footmen,

motioning for him to bring him a glass of brandy.

He took a sip, but his mother did not leave him alone for long.

“Christopher, it was rude to walk off like that while I was in the middle of my story. I really think you should show more manners.”

But Christopher tuned her out, his eyes falling upon a young woman. Four or five young gentlemen were flocking around her

near one of the fountains. She was stunning.

Her blue eyes shone with excitement, and, for a moment, their eyes met. She blinked and turned her attention back to the gentleman who had been speaking to her.

“Who is that, Mother?” he asked, interrupting her tirade, and nodding his head at the young woman.

His mother stopped talking and followed his gaze. She looked back at him, no doubt shocked that he had even noticed the girl.

“Her? That is Lady Lydia Baker. The little enchantress. No doubt, she is looking for a rich husband. Her family has fallen on hard times.”

He waved off his mother’s comment and decided to leave the party. He had had quite enough of “polite society” for one evening. He excused himself and started to leave, despite his mother’s protestations.

“You have many other people to occupy you, Mother. Besides, they are here to see Lord

Clarkson, not me.”

“But my dear, you really should go and talk to Lord Witheby before you leave!”

Christopher did not stop. He wove his way through the plethora of guests, who were aimlessly milling about like so many ants. He could imagine them exchanging bits of useless gossip, antennas stuck out of their heads, poking the air around each other’s faces. The image made him laugh, but as he came around a hedgerow, he bumped into someone.

He growled as if it had been the other person's fault and not his own. When he looked down, he saw that it was the girl he had pointed out to his mother. She stumbled backward, and he caught hold of her arm, so that she wouldn't fall.

She raised her eyebrows, looking up into his face as if waiting for an apology. He let go of her arm and walked around her without offering one. He huffed.

“Spoiled brat,” he said under his breath
as he strode out of the garden and into the
shadows.

Chapter 2

“How rude!” Lydia said, giving a scowl behind her in the direction of the insolent young gentleman now striding away. Patricia, Lydia’s lifelong friend, gave a similar frown of disapproval.

“Indeed,” Patricia agreed.

“Wasn’t that Lady Clarkson’s son, Lord Beaumont?” Lydia asked as they walked back to where the festivities were taking place.

Lydia had needed a respite from all the young

gentlemen flocking around her. She had suggested that she and her friend, Patricia, take a short stroll around one of the fountains.

“Yes. He often comes into Father’s shop looking for obscure old books. I’ve always found him to be cold and bitter,” Patricia replied.

Lydia nodded, looking down at her feet as they walked back to the party. She disliked such men. They were rude without reason and treated everyone around them as if they were

inferior.

“Come, we should rejoin Eleanor,” Lydia replied. They found Eleanor where they had left her in her wheelchair. The hosts of the party were talking to her, no doubt Lady Clarkson regaling her with another story. Despite their hostess’s overbearing manner, Eleanor liked her and listened to the stories with rapture. There was little else for a crippled young woman to do than listen to stories of other people’s ventures. Lydia felt a pang of guilt twist in her chest. It’s my fault,

she thought. The same thought had plagued her ever since her sister's accident.

She remembered coming back with help that fateful day. For a terrible moment, she had been afraid that her sister was dead. But when Eleanor had heard them coming, she turned her head slightly, closing her eyes in relief.

“Did you see Lord Beaumont leaving? He is certainly a strange young man. . .” Lydia heard the other guests whispering, as they

neared Lord and Lady Clarkson and her sister.

“Well, good evening, Lady Lydia! I didn’t know you were here.”

Lydia turned to see one of her old friends, Cecelia Dever.

“Hello, Lady Cecelia. How are you?” she asked, smiling. Cecelia linked arms with her and took a conspiratorial tone.

“I am well. But you, how are you? I saw

Lord Beaumont bump into you. What did he say?" she asked.

"Nothing. Not even an apology," Lydia replied but went no further. She detested gossip. "How is your mother? You must both come to tea very soon."

"She is well, thank you. Yes, we will do that," Cecelia promised with a smile, before returning to her escort.

Lydia continued, speaking to various

friends and acquaintances as they passed. She mixed well with people, comfortable in most circles. She glanced at her sister to check that all was well with her. She was still chattering away with Lord Clarkson. He had become somewhat of a father figure to her. It was one of the reasons why Eleanor had agreed to come with Lydia this evening.

“Ah, Lydia, my dear. There you are,” her aunt came up to her and joined their circle.

“Yes, Aunt. What is it?” Lydia asked.

“Have you been introduced to Lord Melbourne yet?” she asked, a mischievous glint in her eye.

Lydia perked one eyebrow. “Not yet. But there is really no need. His reputation more than precedes him. I would not marry him for all the gold in England.”

“Well, my dear, you must marry someone,” her aunt protested.

“I am well aware of that,” Lydia replied.

“Let us talk no more of that tonight. We are here to celebrate Lord Clarkson’s birthday, not find me a husband.”

“A lady of your standing must take every opportunity presented to her,” her aunt said dryly.

Lydia laughed. “Now, Aunt. Stop that! I promise I will find a husband. One day. But I have some time yet. Now I must return to Eleanor’s side. I have left her alone long

enough.”

She, Patricia, and her aunt joined Eleanor and Lord Clarkson. Lady Clarkson had taken her leave to regale someone else with her stories.

Lydia curtsied as they neared, “Lord Clarkson, happy birthday. And thank you for inviting us this evening.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine, of course,” he smiled. She liked Lord Clarkson.

He was very different from his wife and stepson. What she knew of his stepson, anyway. She hoped she would not meet Lord Beaumont again. She detested arrogant, entitled people, especially noble ones.

“Lord Clarkson says I am looking better every time he sees me,” Eleanor chimed in.

“I have to agree with him there,” Lydia said. “You are growing stronger every day.”

“Perhaps I shall be able to dance at your

next birthday. What do you say to that, Lord Clarkson?" Eleanor smiled.

"Well then, I will have to have the first dance with you, of course," he said.

They chatted for a little while longer and then readied to take their leave. Lydia did not want Eleanor to exhaust herself, and it had already been a long day.

"Thank you again, Sir. It has been a lovely evening. Please say good night to Lady

Clarkson for us,” Lydia said. If they waited to say goodbye to her, they would be there for another hour.

“I will,” he took her hand and kissed it and then did the same with Eleanor and her aunt. “Thank you for coming. You have made my birthday celebration one worth attending.”

Eleanor laughed and thanked him. Lydia went behind her sister’s wheelchair and pushed her through the garden at a leisurely pace. The sun had set, and lamps and candles

had been lit all over the park. It was enchanting, like a magical fairy forest from one of their books.

“I am glad you decided to come with us, Eleanor. I think it has done you a world of good to get out of the house.”

“I agree. I wish we could come here every night. Then again, I suppose it would lose some of its charm after a while. Still, it has been a wonderful evening.” Eleanor sighed contentedly as they passed through the open

gates. Their carriage was waiting for them right outside. Lydia pushed the wheelchair as close to the door of the carriage as she could. She climbed in first, and then a footman picked Eleanor up and placed her on the seat beside Lydia. Her aunt climbed in last, and the footman closed the door.

“Do you think I will ever be able to walk again? To dance as I told Lord Clarkson?” Eleanor asked, as they drove slowly through the dark streets of London.

Lydia thought for a moment. She did not wish to give her sister false hope, but she also did not want to crush her dream.

“I don’t know. But if this last year has taught me anything, it’s that you are the strongest person I know. If you really put your mind to it and work as hard as you have the last few months, I wouldn’t be surprised if you do open the ball with Lord Clarkson at his next birthday celebration.” She grasped her sister’s hand and gave it a squeeze.

Eleanor simply nodded and leaned her head against the frame of the carriage window. “Do you think I shall ever marry? I mean, what if I’m not able to walk again?”

Lydia and her aunt exchanged glances. “That I do not know. In my experience, men are hard to understand. But there must still be some kind, decent men out there who would look past your affliction and see just what a wonderful and beautiful a person you are. I would not worry too much about it now, Elle,” Lydia said, using her childhood nickname.

“You are only seventeen. You have plenty of time.”

“You’re right, I suppose. I just wonder sometimes.”

“I know you do. And it’s perfectly normal to wonder, but don’t give up hope just yet.”

Lydia teased and winked at her. Eleanor grabbed her hand and grasped it between both of hers.

“How did I end up with the best sister in

the whole world? I tell you; I am the luckiest girl to have a family such as mine,” Eleanor said.

Lydia wrapped her free arm around her sister’s shoulders and hugged her close. “I am the lucky one,” she said.

Chapter 3

Christopher raked his hands through his hair in frustration.

“Yes! Who is it?” he yelled. Someone had knocked on his door every fifteen minutes for the last hour. A footman popped his head around the door, wearing an apologetic look on his face.

“I’m sorry, my lord. Her ladyship has sent another note for you,” he said.

Christopher waved him into the room,
“Yes. Hurry up, then,” he said impatiently,
holding out his hand for the note. His mother
had been calling for him and sending
messages, imploring him to come downstairs
for tea.

He looked at the note, then quickly
crumpled it and threw it on the floor. He stood
and went to the mirror. He resembled a
madman, with his short hair standing on end.
He smoothed it down and huffed. “How am I
to get any work done with her constant

nagging?” he said to no one in particular. The footman was still standing in the room, waiting for an answer.

“Well, what is it?” Christopher asked him harshly.

“What answer shall I give her ladyship?”

“You shall give her no answer,” he said flatly.

The footman left with a curt bow, closing

the door quietly behind him. Christopher went back to his writing desk near the window and tried to concentrate. He was in the middle of writing his new book, a philosophical piece, and he had been struck with writer's block. Of course, his mother's constant interruptions were not helping matters. He wrote a few words and then sat staring out of the window, his quill braced between his teeth, waiting for inspiration to come.

Unfortunately, his momentary quiet did not last. Another knock sounded, and he

nearly flipped his writing desk over as he stood up, enraged that he was being interrupted yet again. He strode to the door and opened it so abruptly that the edge banged loudly against the opposite wall.

“What?!” he yelled, thinking it was the footman again. His mother stood outside his door, stunned by his tone.

“Really, Christopher. I thought I’d raised you better than to shout at a woman,” she entered his room and looked around, noting

his quill and paper on the writing desk.

“What do you want, Mother? I’m very busy,” he said crossly.

“I miss my son. I would like him to come down to tea and spend time with his dear mother. Is that too much to ask?”

“Yes, it is,” he said, walking back to his writing desk and sitting down with a huff. She followed him, and he realized that he was not going to get any peace until he did as she

wanted.

“Please, son. I never see you anymore,” she whined. “Why are you so distant and cold with me? We used to get along so well.”

That was before Father died, and you married another man. Before you became insufferable, he thought but did not dare to say. She was doing it again, manipulating him into feeling guilty for not paying her enough attention. The truth was she had pushed him away with her behavior over the last few

years. He could not abide high-maintenance women, even if they were his own mother.

“Very well. I will come down for one cup of tea, and that is all. In return you must promise to leave me be for the rest of the afternoon,” he said.

“I promise, dear. Now come along,” she said excitedly.

He rolled his eyes and followed her reluctantly. He paid little attention to his

surroundings as he trailed after her into the parlor, but he froze when he realized it was not just his stepfather waiting for them. A young lady sat at the table as well, her hands folded decorously in her lap. His mother had ambushed him.

“Son, this is . . .,” but before his mother could say anything more, he turned and left without a word. The butler opened the door for him and helped him put on his jacket before he stomped out of the house. He didn’t know where he was going, only that he had to

get away from his mother. She was driving him insane, and her nagging about marriage and presenting eligible young ladies to him was making him livid. How could she keep doing this to him?

Before long he found himself in the center of London. He thought he might as well check how his latest book was selling while he was there.

He walked down to Newton and Hughes, a book shop specializing in rare and old

volumes. Christopher had asked the owner if he would sell his book, and the man had agreed. A young girl greeted him as he walked in, the owner's daughter, who worked the counter, so her father could sit in the back and repair old books.

He approached the counter and gave a slight nod.

“Yes, sir. What can I do for you?” she asked.

“Have any of my books sold this week?”
he asked, not caring to exchange pleasantries.

“No, sir, I’m afraid not,” she replied.

He looked around the counter and saw that they had been pushed to the back behind some other volumes. They were stacked in a higgledy-piggledy fashion, with no real attention paid to their display at all.

“Well, no wonder,” he said and started rearranging the counter, so that his books

were at the forefront. He stacked some of them into a pyramid and then placed one at the very top, propping it upright with the cover making a V-shape. The red leather binding and gold lettering on the cover was very striking. Impossible that his book would not start selling now! His work was of exceptional quality. It needed only to be perfectly displayed to the public. He had a vision of sales pouring in and his words becoming famous, like those of Plato.

“Please, sir,” the girl said and started

gathering the books he had moved to the side.

He hadn't realized that some had dropped to the floor in his haste to arrange his own. She bent down, a scowl on her face.

“I'm sorry, I . . .,” he started, then promptly turned and left the shop, not knowing what else to say.

He shoved his hands in his pockets and continued to walk along the cobbled streets. Why wasn't his work selling? True, the owner had some authors worth reading, but most of

it was silly romantic slop. His books, on the other hand, were well-written, perfect masterpieces for the world to marvel at. If that silly girl hadn't virtually hidden his books, he might have sold them by now.

He walked through the streets a while longer, hoping that by the time he returned home the lady to whom his mother had wanted to introduce him would be gone.

When he finally reached home, however, he was sorely disappointed. He heard voices

coming from the parlor, one he did not recognize among them. He held a finger to his lips, motioning for the butler to keep quiet about his return. He tried to creep upstairs, but his mother caught him as his foot touched the first step of the staircase.

“Ahh! Christopher, there you are. Come, my dear, we have been waiting for you so that we can go into lunch,” she said and took him by the arm, leading him into the dining room. His stepfather had escorted the young lady there already and was pulling out her chair.

“Mother, I have told you a million times, I don’t want to court or marry anyone,” he whispered harshly, not caring if the girl heard him.

“Shhhh. You wouldn’t know what was good for you if it hit you on the head,” his mother whispered back as they walked into the room and took their seats. He scowled at the girl momentarily, folding his arms over his chest.

“Christopher, may I present Lady Diana Horn, daughter of the Marquess of Abbeton?” His mother asked.

“How do you do, Lord Beaumont?” Lady Horn inquired. Her sweetness was sickening.

“I am well, thank you,” was his only reply.

He remained quiet and distant throughout the meal, leaving his stepfather and mother to engage the young woman in

conversation.

When the meal was over, he stood and gave a slight bow to the girl. “Lady Horn,” he nodded. “It was nice to meet you, but I doubt we will meet again. Good day,” he said and left the room.

A Relentless Love for the Shattered Lady-Preview

Chapter 1

Colonel Samuel Jacobs, second son of the Duke of Summersfield, walked up to the Beaumont mansion for the wedding feast. The woman he was courting, Eleanor Baker, was the sister of the bride. He was all nerves as he climbed the steps, flanked by his brother, Daniel, and their parents.

Lydia Baker and Christopher Beaumont had just been married in the church. All the guests were arriving at the lavish mansion of the groom for the post-wedding celebrations.

He straightened his coat and took a deep breath before knocking on the front door. The butler let them in, greeting them and directing them to the great hall. Tables had been set in a U-shape around the great hall.

But Samuel did not pay much attention to the beautiful decorations of the hall. He was searching for Eleanor. He wished they could be alone rather than having his family following behind him. For a long time, he had been dreading the moment that he would

introduce the woman he loved to his parents.

He was not so worried about his mother or

Daniel, but his father would most likely throw a fit.

He spotted Eleanor as they passed by the open door leading into the parlor. It seemed that she had been looking out for him as well. When their eyes met, Samuel's heart soared. She was so beautiful, her eyes radiating kindness and joy.

Her maid came up behind her and

pushed her forward in her wheelchair. That was the rub. His father would not like the fact that she was paralyzed, needing to be in a wheelchair or carried in order to get around.

He swallowed and directed his family to the parlor, feeling like his heart might beat out of his chest and roll across the floor. The fact that Eleanor was wheelchair-bound did not matter to him in the least. Her heart and character mattered more to him than her disability.

In the few months since he had met her and come to know her better, he knew that she was the woman with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life. But he feared they would have an uphill battle to fight to win over his family.

She beamed up at him as they came into the room. He could not help but smile too. Her smile was infectious.

It had been that way when he first met her. He had been at a ball, fighting acute

boredom as he watched the other couples dance.

He first noticed her as her maid wheeled her into the corner and out of the walkway, stopping her near a giant potted fern. She looked so serene, watching everyone else dance. That is what struck him most. He did not know her story, but she seemed happy, even though she could not participate in the merriment.

At that moment, another young lady joined her, fanning herself as they talked. She was not

as pretty as the girl in the wheelchair, but seemed pleasant enough. The two girls laughed about something, and he was drawn to the young lady in the wheelchair even more.

He pushed himself away from the wall he had been leaning on and walked over to her. She seemed to think that he was trying to get past her, worried that she was in the way.

"Move me back, please, Jane," she whispered.

"No, please. You are perfect right where you are," he said.

He smiled down at her, and she seemed surprised that he was talking to her. It made him sad to think that such a beautiful creature probably spent most of her time being overlooked by others simply because she was in a wheelchair.

She blushed slightly and lowered her eyes. He sat down in a chair next to her and cleared his throat.

"I hope you will not mind if I introduce myself?" he asked.

She looked up at her maid and smiled. "My maid, Jane, can introduce us," she offered, smiling impishly.

Samuel remembered having to hold back a laugh. But he went along with it anyway.

Jane stepped forward and curtsied. "May I introduce Lady Eleanor Baker?" she said.

Eleanor smiled, perfect white teeth gleaming from her oval face. He nodded and smiled in return.

Jane leaned forward and asked in a hushed whisper, "What is your name, Sir?"

Samuel looked up at her and grinned, "Colonel Samuel Jacobs, at your service."

Jane straightened and turned to her mistress. "May I present Colonel Samuel Jacobs?"

Eleanor bowed her head. "A pleasure to meet you, Colonel Jacobs."

"The pleasure is mine, I assure you," he replied.

Eleanor blushed again, and he thought there was no better sound in the world than her saying his name. She turned to the other young lady and held out her hand towards her. "This is my new friend, Lady Christine. It seems we are all kindred spirits, doomed to the corner."

Samuel laughed, "Yes, it would seem so. But I do not mind, now that I have found such charming companions."

And they had been inseparable ever since. All of this flashed through his mind as they neared Eleanor.

He had thought of proposing to her so many times in the last few weeks. But he wanted his family to meet her first. He bit his lip momentarily. This would tell if she were up to the task of becoming a part of the Jacobs

family or not. She may decide that she did not want to deal with the trials that were sure to lie before them where his father was concerned. There was only one way to find out.

"Good day, Lady Eleanor. May I present my father and mother, Lord and Lady Jacobs, the Duke and Duchess of Greystoke. And this dashing fellow is my older brother, Lord Daniel Jacobs, Marquess of Greystoke. He is quite the 'man about town,' so do not believe a word he says." He winked.

Eleanor smiled, her eyes alight with amusement. "I am so pleased to meet all of you," she said.

She offered her hand to Daniel, which he shook. She nodded to his mother and then offered her hand to his father. Samuel held his breath, wondering if his father would be kind enough to take it.

Thankfully, he was not rude and bowed his head, scrutinizing her all the while.

"Lady Eleanor, a pleasure. Would you excuse my son and me for a moment?" his father asked, a tight smile pasted on his face.

Eleanor looked to Samuel with a questioning gaze, her brows drawn into a worried frown. "Of course, Your Grace."

"No. Whatever it is, I am sure it can wait, Father," Samuel whispered to his father.

He went to sit by Eleanor. He knew his

father would not want to make a scene in front of so many other distinguished members of society. Samuel ignored the glaring looks which he was sure that his father was giving him.

"Beautiful ceremony, was it not?" Eleanor asked.

Samuel watched his family go back out into the great hall, his brother giving him a mischievous smile.

"Yes, it was," he replied, leaning in closer so that only she would hear, "but nothing and no one is more beautiful than you."

"You flatter me so," she replied, blushing.

He loved the way he could read her emotions through her eyes and how adorable it was when her nose wrinkled with each smile.

"There is no other way to treat a woman like you," Samuel replied.

Eleanor gave him a look of mock surprise. "Really, Samuel. You are incorrigible."

"I know. But you like me that way," he teased.

She gave him a sideways smirk, "Yes, well. You shall have to behave yourself or I will tell Christopher. Then where will you be?"

Samuel laughed, "Very well. I would not

like to tangle swords with your new brother-in-law. So, I shall do my best not to make you blush as you are doing now."

"I am not blushing!" Eleanor protested.

"Oh, but you are. And I do so like it. It is very becoming," he said. He stood and started to push her into the great hall so that they could find a seat for the wedding feast.

He found the place near the bride's and groom's chairs where a seat had been left out

for Eleanor. He pushed her into the spot and leaned down to whisper in her ear, "I shall see you after the meal."

"Oh, no, please. Sit here. Lydia has a place saved for you right here next to me," Eleanor protested.

Samuel looked down at the place card, happy to see that his name had been scrawled in beautiful, flowing penmanship on the delicate white card.

"Well, how wonderful," he said. He took his seat, as many of the other guests were doing the same. The bride and groom were still greeting people at the front door.

"Your brother seems very charming," Eleanor stated.

Samuel eyed his father as he sat down on the opposite side of the hall. His brother sat a few seats down from them, chatting with an old friend from Cambridge.

"Yes, he is the model of a Duke's son," he said. And he meant it. His brother had all the social refinements needed by the eldest son, who was readying to take over from his father. He would make a great Duke someday.

"So are you," Eleanor said.

"Not me. I am glad that I am the spare. I relish having the freedom to make my own way in the world. I would not like being tied down to the estate like Daniel is," he replied, scrunching up his nose.

"Even so," Eleanor said, "any estate would be lucky to have you at the helm."

Samuel smiled. "Every good man needs a good woman at the helm with him. You would make a wonderful sailor," he said.

Her eyes danced, and he knew she had caught his meaning.

"Shall we go for a walk in the gardens later, when the dancing starts?" he asked.

"I thought you would never ask."

Daniel leaned back in his chair, looking across the hall at his brother. Samuel was talking with Eleanor, and he had to admit that she was a very charming girl.

"What do you think of Samuel's young lady? She seems to have bewitched him. I do not believe I have ever seen him so happy,"

Daniel commented.

His father sniffed, waving his wrinkled hand. His blue eyes were cold and piercing. "Samuel has always had a soft spot for the injured and infirm. Do you remember the falcon he brought home with the broken wing? This girl is no different. He feels sorry for her. That is all," his father sneered.

He took a swig of wine and gulped it hastily. He set his glass down on the table, the wine almost sloshing out onto the pristine

white tablecloth.

Daniel raised an eyebrow at his father and then turned his attention back to his brother and Lady Eleanor.

"I do not think so, Father. He seems to really care about her," Daniel said.

"If he wants to throw his life away with a crippled woman, he can be my guest. At least you have a level head on your shoulders," his father shot back.

"So, you are saying that since Samuel is not the heir, you would let him marry her? What if I had fallen in love with her first?" Daniel asked, his ire pricked.

"Do not be absurd! Of course, I would never allow you to marry a woman like that. You are the future Duke of Greystoke. I do not like the idea of Samuel marrying her, but he does not have the responsibilities you carry. He will live out his life as a career army man, I presume."

Daniel nodded. He detested the way his father was talking about Eleanor. But it was not a conversation which he wanted to continue in the here and now. "Well, they look happy. And they do make a handsome couple, no matter what you say."

Daniel knew Samuel would never let Eleanor go. He was stubborn, but Daniel would help him in any way he could.

Chapter 2

Samuel bowed and kissed Eleanor's hand as they were readying to leave. His father and mother had already said their goodbyes and gone out to the carriage.

"Will you write to me?" she asked.

"I would much rather see you. May I visit tomorrow?" he asked.

She smiled. "Of course."

"Until tomorrow then."

He and Daniel joined his parents in the carriage. His mother was sitting on the opposite side of the coach from his father, as was usual.

Later that afternoon, Samuel could not stop smiling on the way back to their home. Samuel had spent all his time with Eleanor, sitting with her on the side of the dance floor.

"What are you smirking about, Brother?"

Daniel asked.

Samuel looked up, seeing that his father and Daniel were watching him. Well, his father was sneering at him.

He glanced at his mother, sitting next to him. She had an indiscernible look on her face. She preferred to stay neutral in all matters until his father's opinion was stated. Then, she usually just went with whatever his opinion was.

"I did not know that I was smirking," Samuel said. He tried to wipe the smile off his face, but he could not. Daniel laughed at him.

"You are indeed," he answered, "and if I am not mistaken, it is because of the lovely Lady Eleanor."

Samuel glanced at his father before answering his brother, "It is indeed."

"Well, you must invite her to dinner so that we may all get to know her better. Any

woman that manages to capture my brother's attention or heart must be special."

He and Daniel shared a laugh.

"That will not be happening," his father said flatly, glaring at him. All merriment died, and Samuel's mother shifted uneasily.

"Excuse me?" Samuel asked, looking from Daniel to his father.

"We will not be inviting her to dinner.

Are you mad, Samuel? Do you know how she could damage your reputation?" his father argued.

"I do not care what people think. Besides, Daniel is the one who must keep up his reputation. And he is much better at it than I am," Samuel said coolly.

"She will not be welcome in our house, and that is final," his father said.

Samuel was about to argue, but Daniel

silenced him with a look. He assumed that they would talk in private when they got home. They had learned to maneuver around their father very well while they had grown up.

When they arrived back at their townhouse, Samuel's father brushed past them and went into his study. He often locked himself away in there. Samuel carried a bit of resentment towards the man, who had not been around much as he was growing up.

He rolled his eyes as he went, Daniel mirroring him. "Come on," Daniel said and ushered him through to the library.

Their mother did not join them but retired to her rooms to lie down before dinner. Samuel hated how his father lorded himself over the family, his mother taking the brunt of his controlling hand.

If it were up to him, he would take his mother away with him on his travels. Hopefully, when he was finished with his term

in the army, he would. Perhaps he and Eleanor would be married by then, and they could all go on a world tour.

Daniel poured them drinks from the decanter and handed him a glass. Samuel took a sip and sat down near the fire. He sighed heavily and leaned his head against the back of the chair.

"Did you really think he would be happy about your choice? She is a lovely girl, Samuel, but you know Father. And you gave

him no warning."

"I do not care! Father was rude and arrogant and boorish. Why does he have to be so high-handed with people?"

"He was not always like this, you know. Mother says that when he was young, he was quite charming. But when he came back from the war, nothing was the same. It was like all the good parts of him died over in America," Daniel said.

Samuel thought for a moment. Was that an excuse? He had never been on a battlefield, so he was slow to judge. But the war had ended over two decades ago, shortly after he was born.

"Give him some time. Perhaps he will come around. If I marry a respectable woman of means soon, he will not care who you marry," Daniel said, taking a sip of his drink.

"But you should not have to cater to his every wish. You deserve to be happy, too,"

Samuel replied, becoming angry again.

"I do not mind. I am not the romantic type like you are. I do not believe in love at first sight and happily ever after," he said sadly. It was odd for Samuel to see his brother open up like this. He was always so private about his feelings.

"Even still. Do you not you believe that there can be respect and admiration between a couple?" Samuel asked.

Daniel laughed, "You are an idealist, Brother. From what I have seen displayed by our parents and others that I have watched over the years, no. The number of people who find happiness in marriage is very slim. But I think you and Lady Eleanor have a real shot. Do not let Father talk you out of it, no matter what he threatens. When I am the Duke of Greystoke, I will take care of you."

Samuel smiled, "Thank you. I want to make my own way in the world though. But your support is much appreciated," he said.

Daniel raised his glass, and Samuel followed. "To Lady Eleanor! I hope you two shall be very happy together."

They both drank the toast, and Samuel nodded, "Thank you, Daniel."

Samuel's father, Edward, paced before the hearth, the fire crackling merrily away. But he was anything but happy. His white hair

reflected the light. His back was bent slightly, making him look older than his fifty-six years. As a commander in the war with the American rebels, his body had taken a beating.

"What is that boy thinking!" he exclaimed. Samuel's mother sat nearby, working on some needlepoint. They waited for Samuel and Daniel to join them in the parlor before moving to the dining room.

"I do not know, dear. Perhaps he does love the girl as much as he says," she replied

quietly. She did not look up from her needlework.

"Oh, so now he loves her? He barely knows the girl, Louise!" he growled. "Am I the only one who has a level head on their shoulders? I should have known you would be on his side. Women are always prone to such stupidity when it comes to love."

Louise closed her mouth against her reply. Edward could get violent with his arguments. She had learned to keep her mouth

shut and agree with everything he said, even if she felt differently. "I suppose you are right, my dear."

"Of course, I am right!" he thundered.

The door opened then, and Daniel appeared, "Right about what, Father?" he asked.

"About your brother's momentary insanity. Please tell me he is not as serious about that girl as he seems," his father said.

His face was red with fury and frustration.

Daniel poured himself a drink and came to sit down next to his mother. "It seems so. Would it be so terrible to let him marry her? She is a lovely girl, and I know they genuinely care for each other. He is not the heir after all. What could it hurt?" Daniel asked.

"And what if the woman you marry is not able to give you a male heir? The estate has to pass to a male child of this bloodline. What makes you think that this woman is able to

conceive? She is paralyzed from the waist down!" his father went on.

Daniel had not thought of that. "How do you know that she is paralyzed from the waist down?" he asked.

"I was talking with Lord Clarkson. Apparently, he has been connected with the Baker family for some time," his father said, calming down only slightly.

Daniel scrunched up his face. "Lord

Clarkson? Is that not Lord Beaumont's
stepfather?"

"Yes," Lord Jacobs replied. "He told me
that Eleanor has been making some
improvements since her accident. But the
doctors are skeptical that she will ever regain
feeling in her legs, let alone ever walk again."

Daniel became pensive. That did put a
different light on the subject. But still, if he
were to marry soon and take the fall for
Samuel, all might work out for the couple in

the end.

Samuel could feel the tension as soon as he walked into the room. His family had all gathered in the parlor, and from his father's red face, he knew they had most likely been discussing him and Lady Eleanor. He took a steadying breath, poured himself a drink, and went to sit down.

He was not going to engage in

conversation over the matter, though. Not if he did not have to. It was a useless discussion to have. He knew his father would never come around. But he had made his decision. He was going to marry Eleanor despite his father's objections. That is, if Eleanor would have him. He was determined to go to her house in the morning and ask for her hand. Her father had already given him his consent.

"What are you so jolly about?" his father growled.

"Am I?" Samuel asked, taking a sip of his drink.

"Don't test me, boy!" his father yelled. Samuel stood, rising to the fight. "Are you really considering this woman as a suitable wife?"

"I am not a boy anymore, Father. I am going to ask her to marry me, and there is nothing you can do to stop me!"

"I forbid it!"

Samuel gave a joyless laugh. "Forbid all you like." Samuel turned to leave the room. He would go down to his club for dinner.

"What if she cannot have children?" his father shot at his back. Samuel felt his heart sink. He had thought about that possibility but had pushed it to the back of his mind.

"Then she cannot have children," Samuel said simply.

His father straightened, incredulous. "You are a fool," he said menacingly. "You will not get a penny out of me if you continue to go ahead with this madness."

"Then I will not get a penny. Can you not see that I do not care about the money?" he asked. "I care about Eleanor. I love her! I do not expect you to understand. All you do is try to control people. Well, I will not be bullied into giving her up. You may be able to live in a loveless marriage, but I certainly will not," Samuel said.

He knew that it was not his mother's fault that his parents' marriage was devoid of love. She was a very warm and loving person, but his father had all but squashed the spirit out of her over the years. He felt bad that she had to endure his father's coldness for the rest of her life. It felt good to stand up to his father for once. He had spent his whole life being dictated to by him. But no more. It was time for him to strike out on his own, if that is what it took.

Samuel turned and headed for the door.

His father continued to rail as he left the room, but he did not turn back. Samuel nodded to the butler, who opened the front door for him, handing him his coat and hat, and then he walked out into the cool night air.

He took a deep breath and put on his coat. He was plunged into near darkness as the door closed behind him. The lanterns on the street had already been lit, casting a cheery glow. He walked down the steps and started towards the club.

He had thought on the matter for some time. Ever since he had met Eleanor, he concluded that he would be all right if he never had children, as long as he could be with her. He had never met anyone who understood him as she did. And Samuel was not about to give that up.

He found solace in the thought that Daniel would back and support him. He did not wish to think of his father passing, and he knew it would not do for him to want for his

father's death to come quickly. And he did not exactly. But his father had never given him a reason to have any feelings of affection or respect for him.

"I will not be moved," he said to himself as he walked into the night.

Chapter 3

Eleanor was carried out of the Beaumont mansion by one of the footmen and placed inside the carriage. Her father followed, climbing into the seat beside her. He helped steady her on the drive back to their home, as it was hard for her to stay in the seat without his help.

She had never realized how much leg strength it took to remain upright in a carriage, but it did. She would be glad when her legs fully regained their strength, and she

was able to go where she pleased on her own.

It bothered her at first, requiring footmen to carry her around and maids to be always at her side to help her.

She had not told her father that she was starting to regain some feeling in her toes. She was even able to wiggle them now. But her muscles were often plagued with tingling sensations, followed by bouts of numbness. Her doctor said it was the normal process of the body healing itself. But Eleanor wished it would heal itself faster. She wanted to dance

with Samuel, as all the other couples did. She wanted to take a walk with him and actually walk beside him instead of being pushed by a maid.

"It was a beautiful day, was it not? Lydia seemed quite pleased," her father said.

"Yes, she looked happy, to be sure. And Christopher did as well. I hope they are very happy together," Eleanor replied. She was happy for her sister, but sad at the same time. She would miss her while they were on their

wedding trip.

Lydia had found a wonderful man, even though they had had a rocky start. And Eleanor had found an equally wonderful man in Samuel. Her heart fluttered at the thought of his smile. Her stomach had been a flurry of butterflies when he had bent to kiss her hand. She could not wait to see him in the morning.

She had always imagined falling in love with a man like Samuel. But to experience it was even more profound. She could not help

that she did not deserve him. He was sweet and affectionate and loved her as she was, wheelchair and all.

"Colonel Samuel seemed happy, too.

Although his family was a bit uptight. Did you discern that?" her father went on.

"I think his father was, but his brother, Daniel, was very kind," Eleanor said.

Samuel's father had been exceptionally cold to her. After their initial meeting, he had pulled Samuel aside to speak with him. She

could not overhear anything that was said, but she was nervous that it had not been favorable.

Her father leaned over and patted her hand. "I would not worry too much. It is a hard thing for a parent to let their children go," he replied.

Eleanor gave him a compassionate smile, "Yes. I imagine it is."

Eleanor lay face up to the sky. Her eyes blurred with pain momentarily. Taking a deep breath, she felt her lungs tingling with pinpricks. She let out her breath slowly and tried to sit up, but she fell back only after raising an inch. She did not have the strength to lift herself. Turning her head to the right, she could see the raging river licking up the sides of the bank, coming for her. She tried to scoot away, but could not move. It was then she realized she was lying over a boulder, making her back bend backwards in a painful position.

She turned her head to the left and saw the crumbling bank rising several feet above her.

Where was Lydia? Trying to recall what had happened and how she had ended up in this position, she closed her eyes against the blinding sunlight. A few minutes later, she heard the sound of horses' hooves thundering in the distance.

"Help!" her mind screamed, but she could not form the words. Lydia's face appeared above her a few seconds later. Relief washed over her, tears slipping down her cheeks.

“I am here, Elle. Everything is going to be alright...”

Eleanor woke with a start. Blinking, she pushed herself up on her elbows. The recurring dream about her accident always brought back a wave of emotions. Thankfully, it ended with Lydia standing over her, her sweet face filled with concern, telling her that it was going to be okay.

Eleanor rang for Jane to come and help her out of bed. She decided to send a note to Samuel, inviting him for tea. She knew it was early and that he would likely not receive it until later in the morning, but she could not help herself. She was so eager to see him.

She folded the missive and gave it to the butler to pass along to one of the errand boys. It was hard for her to breathe just thinking about him. She had Jane turn her towards the window, and she looked out at the chirping birds, hopping from branch to branch as they

scavenged for food for their young. She could not say that she did not have doubts about her union with Samuel. She knew her father respected him, but what would his family say?

She had felt his father's scrutiny more than once at the wedding breakfast. It had been her main concern in meeting his family. She knew that not many parents would be happy to see their son married to a cripple.

But no matter what his family thought of her, she knew one thing for sure: she was in

love with Samuel! And she would do whatever she could to make him happy.

Eleanor settled in to read the rest of her book. She and Lydia had started reading it together but had not been able to finish it with all the wedding plans to see to. When Lydia returned from her honeymoon, Eleanor would have to lend it to her so she could find out how it ended, not that she would have ample time for reading now that she was married. Eleanor smiled to herself. She hoped that soon she would know what it was like to run her

own home.

Barely an hour passed before a knock came to the door.

Eleanor set her book down without even placing a bookmark in it. "That must be Samuel," she told Jane, who promptly went to the front door to answer it.

Moments later, Samuel came into the room and bowed. She bowed her head in return.

"Please do sit down," she said, motioning to the chair beside her.

"Thank you," he said. His gaze made her insides melt. If she had been standing, she was sure she would have gone weak at the knees.

"Jane, please call for some tea," she instructed.

"Yes, my Lady," she said and stepped out of the room.

"I am sorry I did not write first. But I could not wait any longer to see you. I have had some news this morning," Samuel began. He shifted in his seat, and she could tell that he was wrestling with something.

Her heart sank. Had his father forbidden him from seeing her again?

"I have just received news that my battalion is leaving tomorrow," he said.

Eleanor felt all the air leave her lungs.

"Leaving?" she asked, almost unable to comprehend the words.

"Yes. I knew we were being called up to go to France, but I had no idea that it would be this soon," he replied.

Tea arrived then, and Eleanor was silent as Jane poured tea. "You may leave us, Jane. Thank you," Eleanor said. Jane curtsied and left the room. She stood right outside the open door for propriety's sake.

"How long will you be away?" she asked.

"A few months," he replied. "But I
promise that I will write to you every day."

"And I will write to you," Eleanor said.
She set her tea down on the side table,
suddenly unable to take a sip. She was worried
about him. They were in a time of peace, but
who knew what trials they would face?

Samuel knelt before her, and her heart

skipped a beat. Was he going to propose to her? She bit her lip and waited.

"I do not want to leave you. But this is the last few months of my term in the army. After that, I promise, I will come back, and we will never have to be apart again," he whispered tenderly.

Her eyes filled with tears. "I will wait for you," she said.

He touched her cheek gently, and she

thought for a moment that he would lean in and kiss her. But he stood and took her hand.

"There is no need to leave yet. Will you not take tea with Father and me before you go?" she asked.

He nodded. "I wish that I could, but I have some preparations to see to before I depart in the morning."

"Yes, of course. Might you come for dinner this evening then? You are welcome

here anytime. You know that."

He smiled and bowed. "I shall see you tonight then. May I bring my brother? He had expressed a wish to get to know you and your family better."

"I would be delighted if he would join us," she replied.

"Good," he said and took his leave.

Eleanor put on a brave face until he was

out of the room, but she could not hold back her tears after he had gone. What if anything happened to him while he was away? She could not bear to lose him.

Samuel and Daniel arrived at the Baker home as the sun was setting. They came into the parlor to await the announcement that dinner was ready to be served. Daniel and Samuel were in the middle of an animated conversation. Eleanor was happy to see that

the brothers shared an equally good sense of humor.

"Lady Eleanor, it is lovely to see you again. I was actually hoping you could help me with a conundrum concerning my brother," Daniel said as he walked into the room.

Eleanor laughed, immediately put at ease. She had been slightly nervous that Samuel had asked to bring his brother. But from their short meeting at the wedding breakfast, Eleanor had guessed he was more

like Samuel than like his parents.

"And what is that?" Eleanor asked as he was seated next to her.

"My brother is ill, I think. He has been delirious of late, unable to eat or sleep. He walks around with his head in the clouds all day long."

Eleanor blushed slightly and made eye contact with Samuel, "Oh? And to what malady do you attribute this odd behavior?"

Daniel leaned in close as if to tell her a secret. "I suspect it has to do with a woman."

Eleanor laughed. "Women have a way of making men go mad, I have heard," she said.

"Yes, well. I suppose he is done for," Daniel said tragically.

Samuel came forward, laughing. "Do leave Lady Eleanor alone, Brother."

Daniel looked at Samuel as if he had been hurt. "Well, I am not one to loosely cast blame, but I hope you know it is all because of you that my brother has been acting so strangely these last few months." Daniel stood and allowed Samuel to greet Eleanor.

Dinner was a lively affair, and Eleanor could not help but think that it would be nice to have Daniel be a part of their family dinners more often. He was a charming gentleman.

When the clock struck ten, Eleanor knew that she would soon have to say goodbye to Samuel. He asked if he could take her for a stroll around the garden before they departed.

Her father and Daniel stayed in the dining room to have a glass of Port and smoke their pipes. He pushed her out into the hallway and subsequently out into the garden. The light from the library showed them the path. The crickets chirped, and the breeze blew softly through the trees.

"I have been dreading this moment all evening," Eleanor admitted.

"As have I. But three months will pass quickly. And we will never have to be parted again."

"I hope you are right. What about your family?"

"Leave my family to me. I know how to handle them."

Eleanor nodded. Samuel took her hand, placing a gentle kiss on it. He then pulled out a gift from within his coat pocket and handed it to her. She turned the small oval frame over and saw that it was a silhouette portrait of him. His strong nose and chin were easily distinguishable, even in the faint light.

"Oh, thank you, Samuel. I have nothing to give you though," Eleanor lamented.

"May I have a lock of your hair?" he asked.

She nodded. He took out a small pair of scissors from his coat, obviously having intended to ask her all along. She turned her head and let him take a small lock of her chestnut brown hair. He kissed it before folding it up in his handkerchief and placing it safely in his coat pocket.

"No matter what happens, know that I care so deeply for you, Eleanor. Do not forsake me. I will be true to my word and return to you."

Eleanor let the tears fall down her cheeks. "I promise."

Daniel came outside then and called for Samuel. It was time for them to be heading home.

Samuel pushed her back inside and stopped her near the hearth. "I will think of you every day until we can be together again."

"And I, you," Eleanor replied. She

watched him go, feeling like her heart was breaking.

Her father came and sat beside her, patting her hand. "Do not worry, my dear. He will be back in no time, you will see."

But Eleanor said nothing. Three months seemed like an eternity already.

Chapter 4

Eleanor stared at her book, having read the last sentence three times without comprehending it. She slammed the book and put it down on the side table. She could not focus on anything of late.

It had been two weeks since Samuel had departed for his battalion. She had sent him several letters that had all gone unanswered. She tried to convince herself that he was busy or that he could not have received them yet. She had to remind herself of his last words to

her, that he would return and they would be together.

But his silence was deafening, and she found her confidence faltering.

"Jane?!" she called.

Her maid had been sitting in the corner, working on the mending. She stood and came over to her mistress.

"Yes, my Lady?" she asked.

"Please go and get my shawl. I would like to walk in the park," Eleanor said. Sitting in the parlor was making her fidgety.

"Of course, my Lady," she replied and went to do her lady's bidding.

As they were about to go out the door, Lydia arrived looking distressed.

"Lydia?! I did not know you had returned. It is so good to see you!" Eleanor

said.

"I had to come. We have just now returned," Lydia said. "I apologize, were you getting ready to go out?"

"We were just going to go for a walk. But please, come into the parlor and tell me all about your trip," she said.

Lydia pushed her back into the parlor and sat down next to her. "I am afraid I heard some news today as we were coming into the

house."

"What is wrong, Lydia?" Eleanor asked, her heart jumping into her throat.

Lydia pulled her chair closer, taking Eleanor's hand. Eleanor grew more worried at this gesture. "Please, Lydia. The suspense is not helping me."

Lydia took a deep breath. "Have you heard from Samuel?"

Eleanor's mind traveled to the worst-case scenario. Had he been injured, or worse?

"No, I have not heard from him since he left to meet his battalion. Why? Did something happen to him?" Eleanor's voice shook with emotion.

"No, not to him, but his brother died this morning," Lydia said. She let that piece of information set in before continuing.

"Daniel? Daniel Jacobs passed away this

morning? That is horrible," Eleanor said, her heart going out to Samuel. "How did it happen?"

If Eleanor could have gotten up to pace, she would have. Her heart was sick with the thought. Daniel had been kind to her, and from what Samuel had alluded to, he was on their side as far as their relationship was concerned.

"He was out riding early this morning. His horse spooked and threw him," Lydia

sighed. "His neck was broken, I am afraid.

They found him a few hours ago. Samuel will not have heard yet."

Eleanor was shocked by how quickly life could change. Daniel had been so vibrant and full of life only a couple of weeks ago. And now he was gone. She knew that Samuel would be devastated. He and Daniel had been close. Memories of her own riding accident over a year before flooded her mind. She was lucky that she had not been killed that day.

"This is terrible news," Eleanor said.

Her heart went out to Samuel for this terrible loss. But then she realized that he would not have heard yet. Even if his family had written to tell him the news, it would not be there for several days.

She did not want to think of how this was going to alter everything for Samuel. She knew that the two brothers were close, so Samuel would be devastated by the loss of his brother. He was looking forward to a life of

freedom, being able to travel around the world. Now, all of his dreams would be crushed.

"A letter for you, my Lady," Jane said as she entered the room carrying a small silver tray. Jane held it out for her, and Eleanor gasped when she saw that it was from Samuel. It was as if a spell had summoned the letter.

She thanked Jane and opened the seal, her heart pounding with the news of his brother's death.

Lydia sat by silently as she read the letter.

My dearest Eleanor,

I hope you are well. I am doing as well as I can. Battalion life has always suited me, as I prefer being out on the road, sleeping in a tent under God's vast sky. My only regret is being away from you.

As always, be reassured in my love for you.

My only wish is to be with you and to make you happy.

The days are long...

Eleanor let the letter fall into her lap, as the rest was about how he was spending his days on active duty. Her heart felt like it was barely beating, weighed down by the news of his brother that he still did not know. She felt like she was also keeping a secret from him.

"What does he say?" Lydia asked.

"He says that he is settling in well, but he is looking forward to the end of his term so we can be together," Eleanor said quietly.

Eleanor could not help weeping as the words came out of her mouth. Soon, Samuel would receive the letter from his parents telling him that his brother had died. She was afraid that the cheerful Samuel she knew would be cruelly extinguished.

Lydia retook her hand, squeezing it. "Are

you all right?"

Eleanor shook her head. "I am upset, of course. The few times I met Daniel, he struck me as a good man. But I am upset for Samuel even more so. My heart aches for him already, and he does not even know."

Lydia patted her hand. "I am so sorry."

"Thank you, Lydia. And thank you for coming to tell me."

"Would you and Father like to come to dinner this evening?" she offered.

Eleanor smiled sadly. "I would like that."

"Good. Come at seven," Lydia said. She stood and hugged her sister.

"You are a treasure, Lydia."

"As are you, Elle," Lydia replied and took her leave, as Eleanor picked up the letter, trying to memorize the last words from the old

Samuel, the cheerful, free spirit.

Because she feared that when Samuel heard the sad news about Daniel, he would never be the same again.

A distressing week passed as Eleanor waited for word from Samuel. No letter came, but she was told that Samuel had arrived back in London. She had spent much of her time with Lydia and Christopher at the Beaumont estate. It was peaceful, as Lord and Lady Clarkson had gone back to their country

estate.

Lydia and Christopher would soon join them in London. Lydia had invited Eleanor and their father to come back to the estate anytime. But Eleanor did not believe she could leave London now. What if Samuel needed her?

The funeral had been held a few days after the accident. They could not wait for Samuel to arrive since it would take several weeks for him to make the return journey

from France. They were to hold a memorial service as soon as Samuel returned to give him the chance to say goodbye to his brother.

Weeks passed and word was sparse concerning Samuel. Having to rely on secondhand information, Eleanor heard that he had arrived late one night at the end of July.

Eleanor hoped that she could be with him at the memorial service. Without direct word from him, she could not know how he

was doing or if she would be able to offer him comfort during his mourning. She did understand his silence, though. This was a time for him to focus on his family, and she would have been remiss if she had demanded to be included. She was, after all, not a part of the Jacobs family yet. But she hoped that she would be able to see him soon.

Another day passed, and still, she had not heard from Samuel. Eleanor became worried, thinking that he should have at least written a note.

"I am sure he will come see us when he is ready, my dear," Eleanor's father said. She had been staring out the window into the street, hoping that she would catch a glimpse of Samuel.

"I am worried, Father. What if he needs comfort and I am not there to help him?"

"There is nothing you can do, my love. He will contact you when he is ready. I am sure he has been overwhelmed with all the

arrangements that needed to be made following his brother's funeral. Now that it is over, I am sure he will come to call."

"I suppose you are right."

Her father came and sat down next to her. "Have you written to him since he returned home?"

"No, I have not," Eleanor admitted. She felt at a loss for words. How could she say anything that would not make him feel even

worse? "I do not know what to say to make him feel better. What if I say the wrong thing?"

"My dear, you cannot fix this for him. You can only be there for him. Be honest and let him know that you are thinking of him. The most important thing you can tell him now is that you care for him and will be right here whenever he is ready." Her father patted her shoulder and stood.

"Thank you, Father." She smiled sadly,

still pensive over what she might write to Samuel. She had Jane push her over to the writing desk, and then she asked for some privacy so that she might form her thoughts.

Dearest Samuel,

I write with a heavy heart at the news of your brother's passing. I want to offer my sincere condolences. I know the two of you were so close. I hope you will allow me to express how deeply sorry I am for your loss.

Please let me know if there is anything I can

*do for you and your family. My father and I are
at your service.*

With love,

Eleanor

Eleanor sat back, reading her words and feeling how insignificant they were. How could she effectively communicate how much she wanted to help, how sorry she was for his loss?

She had known loss, too. Her mother had

passed away when she was no more than six years old. She had been so afraid and lonely after she had died. Lydia had taken over as an honorary mother. But their father had retreated from life, disappearing into his study for days to close himself into his grief.

She knew that words were not going to heal his wounded heart. Still, she knew that Samuel would appreciate hearing from her, even if he could not pull himself away from his family.

She folded the letter and called Jane. She would see that it was delivered to Samuel. She watched her maid go, hoping that her words were enough to bring a little comfort to the man she loved.

Samuel sat in the study as the sun set. His brother had been buried the week before, and he had not been able to make it back in time. His heart ached with all the things he had missed, namely not being able to say

goodbye to his beloved brother and friend.

The room grew darker and darker, mirroring how he felt on the inside. His world had come crashing down around him when he had heard the news about Daniel. It had all happened so quickly. He was still having a hard time believing that his beloved brother was really gone.

A servant knocked at the door, asking apologies. "A letter has just been delivered for you, my Lord. From Lady Eleanor," the footman said.

Samuel perked up. The footmen came in and handed the letter to Samuel.

"Thank you, Andrew," he said as he opened the letter.

"Of course, my Lord," he said and left the room. Samuel shook his head. It was making him feel awkward for the servants to call him "Lord."

He opened the letter, his eyes already

starting to fill with tears. He read Eleanor's words. They washed over him like a healing balm. He missed her so much. But he felt that he could not go and visit her yet. His father was so fragile. And he would be furious if he knew that he had gone to see her.

He lay the letter down on the desk and covered his face. He let the tears flow freely, weeping over his departed brother and the burden that now fell on his shoulders.

Stealing the Heart of a Runaway Lady-Preview

Prologue

A low fire in the grate sent a warm and flickering glow over the tavern. It was a crowded night, full of revelers celebrating the end of a hard winter and welcoming in the spring.

The air was filled with good cheer, and there was laughter on everyone's lips.

It was a simple place, yet jolly and welcoming, and the patrons produced a roar of happy noise. The wooden walls, though well-

built, were plain and simple in design, and candles burned throughout the room, offering a meagre light.

The men smashed together their tankards of ale or mead, the liquid splashing over the top and leaving the floor a sticky mess. They talked of their hopes for the summer to come, of their loves and their lives. It was a night of pleasure and new beginnings, a time of promise and forward thinking, and everyone was jovial.

Everyone but one man, that is. He sat in the far corner of the tavern, on a bench that ran along the wall, and he looked into the room with a heavy heart. He would not be joining in the celebrations, for he had nothing to celebrate.

It was a dull corner, the light barely reaching the walls, and this man was half in shadow. His ale remained untouched on the small, circular table in front of him, and he stared at it, unseeing and uncaring. No one seemed to notice him, and for that he was

grateful.

He was well-dressed, smart in his orderly tailcoat and simple cravat, his attire better than that of most men in the tavern, but his suit was modest, not overly fanciful or too colorful. He was clean, tidy, well presented, a humble and unassuming man. On his face, though, he wore a deep and despairing frown, and there were dark circles under his eyes.

He reached forward and grabbed at his drink, his wobble belying the state of his

sobriety, for he was several ales into the evening. He took a long slug then clumped the clay tankard back on the table, and he sat back with the most sorrowful of expressions. His shoulders sagged miserably.

“Cheer up,” another man said as he swung a leg around the stool opposite, a cheeky grin on his face. “It might never happen, what you are pining after.”

“What a pearl of wisdom that is.” He snorted at the stranger, looking up at him with

eyes bleary from ale and sadness. “What if it has already happened?”

“No point looking so down about it.

Things will get better. You cannot change the past, lad, but you can shape your own future.”

He raised an eyebrow, pleased with sharing such profound knowledge.

The stranger picked up his own drink, took a gulp, and let out a satisfied and confident gasp. The first man looked at him curiously, head tilted, and a flicker of hope in

his eyes for the first time in a long time. The idea of shaping his own future was indeed appealing.

“Who are you?” he asked.

“The name’s Morgan Baker,” he said with a nod. “I find myself in need of a . . . shall we say, business associate?”

“Is that so?” The first man was intrigued now, interested, and he sat forward slightly.

“What sort of business?”

“It is not the easiest of jobs, my friend,” Morgan said, sucking in the air appraisingly. “Bit of a toughy. Keeps you on your toes, ya know? It pays well, but no time for scowling or whining, know what I mean?”

“I understand you well enough,” the man replied, nodding slowly as he considered it. He knew he was not like the flighty youth who did what they could to avoid a day’s hard work—youth this Morgan had no doubt encountered many times.

“Hmm.” Morgan looked him up and down, then stood up from his seat, shaking his head. “Not sure you are up to it, actually.”

“Wait,” the man said, eager and full of life now. This was an opportunity he did not want to miss.

“Interested, are you?” Morgan sat back down, a knowing smile on his lips. “Think you can handle it?”

“Of course,” the man said, raising himself up in his seat, making himself almost imperceptibly taller, prouder.

“Well, I suppose I ought to tell you more about the job, then.”

“I’m all ears. But one question. Why me?”

Morgan shrugged.

“You seem a pretty decent chap, and by the looks of things you could do with a good

turn. Nobody looks that glum without good reason.”

The first man let out an unhappy chuckle, raised an eyebrow to confirm Morgan’s assessment.

“It would seem that you are very astute, and a good judge of character, Mr. Baker.”

“I like to think so,” Morgan replied with a cock of his head. “And please, call me Morgan. No need for formalities if we are

going to be associates. What is your name, lad?”

“My name?” He seemed momentarily dazed, as though he had not realized he would need to divulge this information. “Why, it is Colin Bl . . . Colin Hunt. My name is Colin Hunt.”

Chapter 1

Julianna

“Would you care to dance, My Lady?”

Julianna glanced at the gentleman, who looked down at her and offered his hand.

Not another one.

She smiled as sweetly as she could muster.

“Thank you, My Lord, but I really am

quite tired. Next time, perhaps?”

She saw him wince, a flicker of something in his eyes—*disappointment?* *humiliation?*—and as he walked away, she breathed out a sigh in relief.

Lady Julianna Campbell, the daughter of the Duke of Repington, was a bright and witty young lady. At twenty-one years old, she loved life and all it had to offer, and she wanted to throw herself into it whole-heartedly. Her manners, as expected of such a young lady,

were impeccable, and she could charm her way into anyone's life.

She was slim, although she had gentle curves that attracted attention more than she liked to admit, and her eyes were a pale, spring green. Her long hair, so often pinned up at the back of her head, was a bright ruby red, the color of fire on a hot day, and it shimmered when she moved.

Her intelligence shone through in everything she did, and while she was spoiled

by a father who dearly loved her, she stayed grounded and fair. She longed for romance, but she had yet to find a suitor who met her exacting standards, and instead she escaped into the world of novels.

She looked around at the gentlemen on offer tonight, and she huffed.

Still no one as good as the heroes in my books.

She felt saddened, suddenly, as though

this was the last place she wished to be.

Parties were normally an environment she thrived in, the very definition of a social butterfly. She would normally breathe light into every corner of the room, until her feet ached from dancing and her throat was sore from talking.

But tonight it was different. Her father had, yet again, hinted about her need to find a husband, and she felt so dismayed about the whole thing that she had simply refused to dance with anyone. How could she, when all

she wanted was someone to love, not one of these boring, conceited men? She was bored and fed up, and she wanted to go home.

She slumped forward, putting her elbows on the table and resting her face in her hands. She blew stray strands of hair from her forehead, and she watched the dancers in front of her, entirely uninspired.

“Lady Julianna, it is good to see you again.”

She looked up to find Lord Henry Forbes, the Earl of Stapleton, towering above her. He wore his usual proud grin, and he bent slightly forward as he stood with his hands behind his back.

“Lord Forbes,” she said, and forced herself to smile.

He was undeniably handsome, Julianna had to admit that. He stood tall and proud, strong and muscular, and his jaw was squared and clean shaven. He wore a deep red tailcoat

that matched the color of her gown, and his boots shone brightly in the light.

His brown curls fell perfectly across his head, and his sideburns were full and thick. His lips were a deep red and plump—kissable, even—but he knew how handsome he was, and Julianna could not bear his conceit.

“Would you care to dance?” he asked, not offering his hand, almost as though it was she who had to chase him.

“Thank you, My Lord,” she said, for what felt like the fiftieth time that evening. “It is most kind of you to offer, but I am really awfully tired and—”

“There are few ladies here tonight whom I would choose to dance with, Lady Julianna, but you are one of them.” His eyes sparkled with arrogance.

“Well, that is most flattering, but I—”

“People come to balls to dance, you

know, my Lady.”

“Yes, I appreciate that, Lord—”

“And I really would like to dance with you. Do you not want to dance with me? I cannot imagine many young ladies would refuse my offer.” He chuckled at this, as though telling a joke, and she looked at him incredulously.

“I am really very tired, and—”

“People will start to gossip if you refuse to dance with anyone. What harm can there be, in one little dance with me?”

“I . . .” She sighed and gave in, knowing she would not win a battle of wills against this persistent, egotistical man.

As they danced, though, she held herself rigid and as far away from him as was acceptable. She let him talk in her ear, hearing his own voice was clearly the most important thing to him, and she let his words wash

through her unheard.

Instead, she admired the ballroom, which was bright and wide. At the far end, a string quartet played merry tunes, and from there dancers were strewn across the wooden dance floor.

Gas lamps lit the room from all angles, right to the seating area at the edge. Faces loomed—happy, drunk, in love—and everywhere Julianna looked, she found resplendent beauty. There were gowns of

every color and shape, and men looked dapper in their finery.

But to Julianna, it all felt dull and gray, and she wanted to no longer be in the arms of this man who smelled of sweat and alcohol. She could feel his breath on her cheek, and she shuddered. She knew many other ladies in that room coveted her position as his dancing partner, but she would willingly give up her spot to any of them if he allowed it.

“It was awful,” she said to her maid later

that night. She groaned and buried her face in her hands. “He is such a horrid man.”

“So other than Lord Stapleton, there were no suitors who took your fancy?” Susan asked, a curious grin on her face. She stood behind Julianna, pulling pins out of her hair and watching her in the mirror.

“Goodness, no, Susan. Really, there is no one in this whole city that has even the slightest appeal.”

“You will find someone soon, then it will be just like those books of yours. All swooning and gushing.”

Julianna looked at her reflection in the mirror, incredulous at Susan’s suggestion, but with a laugh on her lips.

“If only that were true.”

Susan pulled out the last pin and let it tinkle into the ceramic dish on the dressing table. She was Julianna’s maid, certainly, but

she was far more than that. They were the best of friends, and they had been since the day Julianna had insisted her father employ her, when Susan was just thirteen and Julianna fourteen years old.

Now, at the age of twenty, Susan had dirty blonde hair tucked into her bonnet and her brown eyes shone with gossip and chatter. Susan was a kind friend, and she would do anything for Julianna, no matter what.

Julianna, already in her nightdress, got

up from her seat and curled herself onto her bed.

“I hope one day to feel the bliss of true love, Susan.”

“And I,” Susan said. She bent down and picked up Julianna’s discarded gown, then folded it over the back of the chair ready to be laundered the following day. “For both of us.”

She giggled then, and so Julianna followed.

“Just imagine,” she said. “Us both falling in love at the same time. It would be wonderful. We could attend each other’s weddings and our children could grow up together.”

“It would indeed be wonderful,” Susan replied.

“But I fear I will be married off before I even get the chance to find true love,” Julianna said sadly.

“Come now, do not think like that. Think of love instead and let yourself drift off to sleep. Goodnight now.”

“Goodnight, Susan. And thank you.”

Susan simply smiled in reply, then picked up the candle and left the room.

Julianna fell rapidly into sleep, tired from fending off unsuitable suitors all night. Her dreams were a whirl of romance and fear,

of love and hate, and when she woke, she was
breathless and covered in a sheen of sweat.

She rubbed at her eyes to rid herself of
the images in her head, and she stepped out of
bed to begin her day. It was bright, the sun
already pouring through her windows. As she
dressed, she thought of how much she loved
the summer.

Summer is the season of love.

She wound her way through Repington

Manor. The long corridors were neatly decorated, the wallpaper striped and bright. At the top of the stairs, she paused and looked at the large and looming portraits that lined the wall.

She had always found them somewhat intimidating, as though history stood over her to judge, the ladies and gentlemen of the past gazing down at her disapprovingly. She looked quickly away, then tiptoed down the carpeted stairway. It opened into bottom stairs wider than the top ones and a large, tiled entrance

way.

Ahead of her, the double doors remained firmly close, the oak highly polished and gleaming. To the left, the butler's pantry and his rooms, the kitchen, the path to the servants' quarters down below the house. To her left, there was the parlor, the dining room, and at the back of the manor, the breakfast room.

She made her way to the breakfast room, her shoes clip-clopping on the hard floor and

announcing her arrival. When she entered the room, she noticed her parents were already there, tucking in toast and jam. There was tea, too, and cheese, all arranged over the white tablecloth.

“Ah, Julianna,” her father said, folding away the paper he had been reading. He smiled broadly, as though seeing her had made his day a little bit brighter.

“Good morning Father, Mother,” she said and took her place at the table.

The room was situated such that the morning sun would pour through the windows, and the heavy brocade drapes were pulled apart to let in the light. Julianna was thankful for that, after her night of darkness.

“How was the ball?” her mother asked, clearly eager for some news.

“It was . . .” Julianna trailed off. She did not wish to sound ungrateful or sullen, but she also did not like to lie to her parents. Her

father jumped in excitedly, saving her from answering.

“Did any of the handsome gentlemen in attendance catch your eye, my dear? I heard there were plenty to choose from.”

Julianna sighed. She dearly loved her father, more than anything in the world, but his insistence on marriage tired her. He simply could not understand her desire to marry for love, and not for some business contract or financial gain.

The Duke Campbell was a kind man, with bright blue eyes that told of his strength and intelligence. His wealth was evident enough from the rotundness of his belly, if not from the finery of his wardrobe, but he was generous with his money, and he would help anyone if he could.

“You know how I feel about that, Father,” Julianna replied sternly, as though reprimanding a young boy.

“Yes, Julianna, my darling girl, but that does not mean you did not meet a man who took your fancy last night.”

“Well, I did not.”

She saw her father shoot a meaningful glance at her mother, who shrugged in return. Julianna’s mother was a meek woman and would say little if she could get away with it. Julianna loved her, but she promised herself she would never grow up to be her mother.

“And there was no one who you might, perhaps, settle for instead?” her father asked, high-pitched hope in his voice.

“Settle?” she asked, incredulous. “Why would I settle? I want to marry only for love, and if that means waiting, then wait I shall.”

“Really, my dear Julianna,” her father said. “I understand, but you are one and twenty years old now, and—”

“Love has no age limit, Father,” Julianna

said. Her eyes sparkled as she jumped into her favorite topic. “Love has no boundaries or links. Love cannot be made or forced, either. It is free, in every sense.”

“That is a lovely sentiment, my dear, but I really think—”

“No, Father,” she said, stern again. “I have made my decision. I will wait for love.”

Chapter 2

Julianna

“Lady Julianna?” But she did not hear the voice behind her.

She was taking a turn in the garden to clear her head. She did not want to defy her father, but the idea of marrying for anything other than love left her cold. She would wait, no matter what her father said and no matter how long. And in the meantime, she wandered the pathways dreaming of sweet nothings and handsome saviors.

It was a beautiful summer's day, the heat from the sun warming her skin. She raised her face to the sky, like a sunflower searching out the sun, and she smiled contentedly. The smell of flowers and freshly cut grass surrounded her, and she felt at peace.

The gardens were large, but well-maintained by a gardener and no less than five under-gardeners. Julianna saw them occasionally, scuttling about with plants or in their knees snipping at the grass, and she liked

to watch them work. The lawns stretched out for over a mile, meandering and dipping into the distance.

Around the grounds of the estate, there were woods thick with trees. As a child she imagined them to be full of fairies and sprites, a magical place full of wonder. She walked past a flower bed full of tulips, bright yellows and reds waving slightly in the summer breeze, and she crouched down to smell them. Ahead, there were daffodils and roses, begonias and petunias, all the colors of the

rainbow.

“Lady Julianna,” Fletcher said again, and Julianna jumped around to find the butler, a little out of breath from catching up to her. “I have been calling you since the turning at the fountain,” he said.

“I am sorry, Fletcher, I did not hear you,” Julianna said, genuinely surprised. She had been too deep into her fantasy of knights and heroes and beautiful weddings, the real world had been pushed to the back of her mind.

Fletcher leaned against the back of a wrought-iron bench as he caught his breath. He was an old man now, his hair more gray than brown, but he was kind and witty, and he had been with their family since before she was born. Julianna liked him a lot.

“Your father wishes to see you,” he said between pants. He looked tired, but his eyes still sparkled with generosity and love. “In his study.”

“In his study? Really?” Julianna squeaked in alarm. In all her life, she had never been called to her father’s study. He usually waited until dinner to speak to her, or when they walked together. She felt the anxiety snake around her. “Do you know why? Is everything all right?”

“I do not know, My Lady,” Fletcher said, straightening up and brushing his hands together as though wiping away dirt. “Only that you must go at once.”

“Oh.” Julianna held a hand to her throat and her eyes searched the ground. Uncertainty tickled at her. “I will come right away,” she said.

“Of course, My Lady.” He hesitated, then turned to return to the house.

She stayed for a moment, at her spot in the garden, letting all manner of thoughts run through her. *Is there something wrong? Perhaps he is sick? Or Mother?* She felt a lump in her throat, a fear pulsating in her.

With a gasp, she dashed across the gravel path, around the fountain, up the steps to the house, bursting in through the door. She looked around momentarily, then dashed along the carpeted corridor to her father's study. She knocked on the big oak door until she heard his voice boom through it.

“Come in.”

She entered tentatively, afraid of what she might discover on the other side, but her

father smiled at her from behind his desk, and she breathed a sigh of relief. She stepped fully into the room, although she still held the door open.

“You asked to see me, Father?”

“Yes,” he said, not looking up from his papers. “Come in, come in. Close the door, if you will, and take a seat.”

She did as she was told, looking around her in wonder as he finished his business. This

room had always been off-limits to her, and therefore held an air of mystery. It was not as fascinating as she had imagined, although she was not sure quite what it was she thought would be so magical. Still, she marveled at the rows of books against the one wall. She loved to read, and books held a special place in her heart. And these books were beautiful—uniformly lined up, leather spines with gold printed titles.

“Julianna?” She jumped at her father’s voice and realized she had been staring at the

books, head tilted in an attempt to read the titles, even though she knew they would not be the novels she so adored.

“I am sorry, Father.” She smiled brightly at him and sat, demure and polite, with her hands tucked neatly in her lap.

“Now,” he began in earnest, looking at her seriously. “I called you here today because we need to discuss something very important.”

She felt a tendril of anxiety slither back

down her throat until she was almost choking, and she looked up at him, concerned. A sense of foreboding settled in her stomach.

Why am I so frightened of what Father has to say?

“As you know, I really feel it is time you married. You are one-and-twenty now, and after our conversation two days ago—”

“But I have yet to find the man I love,” Julianna declared simply, not allowing him to

finish his sentence. She breathed out a sigh of relief.

This again.

They had talked of this often, and Julianna knew she would stand firm in her belief, and that her father loved her enough to allow it.

“I appreciate that, Julianna,” he said, steeping his hands in front of him. He avoided her gaze, and her heart began to beat faster.

Why is he bringing this up now, in this manner, right now?

“The issue is that you have had plenty of time to find a suitor of whom you approve and, quite frankly, you are running out of time. This cannot go on much longer. You need to be married soon.”

“But Father—”

“As your father—” he continued without

giving her a chance to answer back. She could see he was nervous about her reaction to his words, but she did not care. She felt furious, and she began to shake with rage.

“As my father, you must—”

“Enough,” he said, his voice firm but not loud and not without love. “Julianna, you will let me speak. As your father, it is my duty to ensure your future, and part of that is ensuring you do not end up a spinster, lonely and full of regret.”

“I will not,” she urged. “My one true love will appear soon. I just know it.”

“Believe me, Julianna, sometimes it does not happen. Sometimes people grow old having only dreamt of love. As you have not found your *one true love* as of yet, I feel I need to . . .” he paused, searching for the right word. “. . . intervene on your behalf.”

“Intervene? Father, what are you talking about? Please, speak plainly.” The tendril had

wrapped around her neck now, tightening until she could barely breathe. She feared what he was about to say next, but prayed he would not say it.

What on earth does he have planned for me?

The Duke sighed and let his eyelids close for just a moment, gathering his strength to continue. Julianna sat in silence, waiting, but refused to meet his gaze. Instead, she stared at the floor, tense and fearful.

“There is a suitor,” he said finally, and
Julianna gasped.

“A suitor?”

“He is a young gentleman of fine
breeding and wealth. I hear the ladies say he
is handsome, too, so there is that.” He nodded
at her encouragingly, as though this would
assuage her horror. But all she could do was
shake her head, aghast.

“And?” she squeaked.

“And he has asked for your hand. And ...” he paused, licked his lips, raised his eyes to the heavens as though in prayer, “and I have accepted.”

Silence descended, tense and thick, and Julianna felt a weight on her chest, restricting her breathing. She choked back her tears, unbelieving. She had always thought her father loved her, but now doubt seeped into her thoughts. She did not want to marry

someone of her father's choosing.

“I . . .” she faltered, looking around the room for some sort of answer, then she looked back at her father. Her eyes were wide and pleading, begging him not to do this. “If I am to be married, am I allowed to know his name, at least?”

The tears threatened to spill down her cheeks, but she blinked them away, refusing to give her father the satisfaction.

“Yes,” He said, equally falteringly,
equally unsure. “He is the Earl of Stapleton.
Lord Henry Forbes.”

“Henry Forbes?”

Julianna felt her world fall away from
her, the stone on her chest pressing harder.
Not only was she not to marry for love, but
she was to marry *that* man. The man who
spoke with such conceit and arrogance. The
man who had nothing but dull conversation
and dull eyes.

Dancing with him had been bad enough,
but to imagine marrying him, lying with him .
. . She shuddered. If she married him, as her
father wanted, her life would be over.

“He is an honorable gentleman,” her
father said, calm but trying to convince her.
“You will be well looked after, and—”

“I . . . I cannot believe you would do this
to me!” Julianna said, and before her father
could answer, she leapt out of her chair and

ran to her room. She locked the door behind her, then curled on her bed and sobbed.

“Go away,” Julianna croaked when the knock came at the door. Her throat ached from sobbing, and her dry eyes were tired and sore.

“It is only me,” Susan said. “The door is locked. May I come in?”

“Yes, one moment, Susan.” Julianna walked across the room and slipped the latch from its place, but she stepped back without opening it. Susan turned the handle and peered around.

“I heard there was some kind of argument between you and your father a few hours ago. Is everything all right?”

“Have you been sent to check on me?” Julianna snapped, then laughed humorlessly.

“No!” Susan said, a shocked expression on her face. She entered the room fully then and closed the door behind her. “No, not at all. I am here of my own accord. I am concerned about you.”

Julianna sighed, although she still walked around her room determinedly, moving things around and pulling things away from their rightful places. Susan looked at her curiously.

“Yes, you could say we had an

argument.” She reached into her wardrobe, snapping another gown from its place and thrusting it into her bag. Then she went to her dressing table, picked out her favorite pieces, threw them in after the gown.

“What are you doing?” Susan asked, looking around at the mess in front of her. “Destroying your room will not solve your problems.”

“What?” Julianna asked, looking up at her maid suddenly, confused by what she had

said. "I am not destroying my room."

"Then what are you doing?" Susan walked over to where Julianna's bag sat wide open on the bed, and she peered in curiously.

"I am simply packing a few things. I am leaving tonight!" Julianna was determined. She had made her decision, and she would stick to it, no matter what. She would not, could not marry Henry Forbes. A life on the streets was preferable.

“You cannot do that,” Susan said flatly, as though she did not quite believe Julianna’s intent.

“Why ever not?” Julianna stopped packing and turned to look at her again. She had suspected Susan would react in such a way.

“Seriously, Julianna. Leaving is not a good idea.”

“Well, I certainly cannot stay here, not

with Father so eager to marry me off to Henry Forbes!”

“Henry Forbes?” Susan looked aghast.

She clearly did not know that part.

Julianna looked at her with a satisfied smirk, although it did not last long. It quickly morphed into an expression of fear and dismay.

“Yes. Lord Stapleton has asked for my

hand, and Father has agreed, without even asking me!”

There was a long pause as Julianna stared at Susan, silently begging her for a solution.

“Well,” Susan said. “That is unfortunate, but . . . you *cannot* leave.” She said it firmly but kindly, and she took the gloves from Julianna’s hand and returned them to the table. She grasped hold of Julianna’s arms and forced her to look up. “It is dangerous out

there. Trust me. I have firsthand experience, as you know.”

Julianna nodded her understanding and sat heavily on the edge of the bed. Susan had been on the streets for some years before Julianna had pressed her father to give her employment. Susan’s parents had died in a terrible accident when she was just ten years old, and she had fended for herself ever since.

In that time, Susan had grown to be tough, to not let anyone take advantage of her.

She had also grown to be wise and knowledgeable, and she knew the perils that lurked on the streets. She urged Julianna once again not to go.

“Please, Julianna, I am begging you. Do not put yourself in the path of danger. There is too much to be wary of, and you are not in any way built for a life on the streets.”

“I understand what you are telling me, Susan, I honestly do. But you must believe me when I say I simply cannot stay here. Not any

longer.”

Susan took a deep breath, nodding to herself.

“All right,” she said, resigned to Julianna’s determination. “Then I am coming with you.”

Julianna smiled and threw her arms around her best friend.

Thank you so much,” she whispered into

Susan's ear. "Thank you for your loyalty, and for your friendship. You cannot begin to understand how much it means to me."

It was near mid-morning, and Julianna had yet to rise, so her mother knocked gently on the door.

"Julianna? Are you all right?"

There was no response, and Mary Campbell pushed open the door to find the room empty and the bed already made.

“Julianna?” she tried again, although she could see there was no one in the room.

“Susan?”

Terror turned her veins to ice, and she dashed into the room, crying out.

“Julianna! Where are you?”

That is when she spotted the letter on the table, written in Julianna’s neat handwriting.

Dear Mother and Father,

*I cannot marry Lord Forbes. I am terribly
sorry.*

I will love you always,

Julianna

Chapter 3

Colin

Colin sat opposite Morgan in the same tavern—and at the very same table—where they had met three years earlier, although it was afternoon now, and the revelers were all at work. He wore simpler clothes, slightly more ragged but still presentable, and his hat was soft on his head.

At twenty-six years old, Colin had grown into his broad and masculine shoulders with aplomb. He was tall and well-built, strong and

wiry. His chestnut hair was carefully trimmed, and his face clean-shaven for his work.

As Morgan had guessed on that first meeting, Colin had experienced much tragedy in his life, and he had been hardened by it. Morgan was the only person Colin had allowed to get close to him in a long time, and everyone else received his cold and hard—but polite—front.

The truth was, though, that underneath his heartache and hurt, Colin Hunt was a

caring, gentle man. He dreamt of love, but he feared the results of romance and the potential loss it brought. He had a soul that was soft, although hidden by his hard shell, and he had a heart full of passion.

“That was a good one,” Morgan said with a nod. He picked up his tankard and took a long gulp of ale. “A good earner.”

“Indeed,” Colin said. He felt exhilarated, as he always did after a job well-done. He had quickly settled into his new role as a

mercenary of sorts, and they were paid well—for their silence as well as their services. “The Baron seemed very happy.”

Morgan sniggered.

“He would, would he not? We returned his contraband to him, along with the man who had stolen it, and the constable was nowhere to be seen. No doubt the Baron will enjoy thinking up a new and unusual punishments for the man’s misdeeds.”

“I would not like to be him tonight, that is for certain,” Colin said with a shudder. He picked up his ale, gulped at it. The more time he spent with Morgan, the more used to copious amounts of ale was he becoming.

Morgan was younger than Colin by two years, but he always acted the elder. He treated Colin like a boy under his wing, and Colin embraced that. Morgan had had a hard life, always on the streets, working from a young age, and that had both wizened and matured him.

Morgan did not know his mother; his father told him she was dead, but he did not know if that was true. His father had been hard on him, beating him at every opportunity. As soon as he could, he left home. Since then, Morgan had worked wherever he could, turning his hand to this trade and another to earn a little spare cash.

He had longed for the mercenary's life, and when he saw Colin in the tavern that night, he knew it was time to act. Colin looked

presentable, if a little drunk, and certainly intelligent. Together they had made a new life.

Morgan's kind soul was rival to that of Colin, and he lived with a humor that belied his difficult beginning. He worked hard, but he enjoyed his life, too. He teased Colin mercilessly for his manner of speech, for his past experiences, and for the way in which he moved.

Colin loved him as the best friend a man could ever want.

“Do not drink too much,” Morgan warned, indicating the ale with a nod of his head. “We have a meeting this afternoon about another job. Apparently the good old Baron recommended us.”

“A meeting with whom?” Colin asked, intrigued.

“The Duke of Repington,” Morgan replied with a chuckle. “One Jonathan Campbell. Heard of him?”

Colin shook his head uncertainly.

“Perhaps, but not that I recall.”

“Me neither,” Morgan said, taking another gulp of his ale. “But if he is paying, I do not much care.”

Colin laughed, agreeing with the sentiment. He was truly enjoying his new life with Morgan Baker. Their friendship was easy and full of laughter.

Morgan had taught him a new way to live. He had been quite correct when he said that a man could shape his own future, and Colin was slowly putting the woes of his past behind him.

“So, what are we hunting this time?
Diamonds? Paintings? Some lost treasure?”

“No,” Morgan said with a grin.
“Something much more exciting than that.”

“More exciting than diamonds?” Colin

scoffed in disbelief.

“Oh, yes. This time, lad, we are on the hunt for a person! That is all I know so far, but I am keen to find out more. I reckon it will be someone who has wronged the Duke. Got to be. Come on, drink up. It is time to go.” With that, Morgan tipped back his tankard, gulping down the dregs, and stood, looking at Colin expectantly.

Colin stared, his eyes aglow, his heart beating with excitement. They had not tracked

a person before, and he could not deny that the idea roused him. It was yet another new experience he was having with Morgan Baker.

“Stop ya’ gaping and come on lad,” Morgan urged. Colin snapped out of his daze, threw back the rest of his ale, and followed Morgan out of the tavern.

Colin mounted his stallion swiftly and with practiced ease. The horse was a great black beast with powerful legs, faster than most other horses. He was significantly

grander than Morgan's smaller horse, the dirty white mare, although she was strong and feisty and would not back down from a fight.

“Twenty minutes' ride to the west,”

Morgan called from his mount. “Follow me.”

Colin nodded. This was how it always happened. Morgan found the work, led the way, took the money, and doled it out. Colin suspected he was there more as a companion than a genuine business associate, someone to keep Morgan company and maybe get him out

of trouble should the need arise, but he did not mind. He preferred to let Morgan handle the business side of things while he simply got on with the job, letting the activity push out all thoughts of his past.

Repington Estate included a large and sprawling building and grounds which were kept in better condition than most. The stable hand took their horses, promising to brush them down and treat them well, then the butler took their coats.

“Fletcher, Sirs. And you are?”

“Mr. Baker and Mr. Hunt,” Morgan said, first indicating himself then Colin. “The Duke is expecting us.”

Colin remained quiet, a little hunched against the weight of such a grand building. He always felt uncomfortable in these manors, feeling his past rushing over him until he could barely breathe. He did his best not to look around.

“Of course,” Fletcher said, “follow me.”

Morgan looked around him with awe.

Colin could not help but snort in amusement, despite his discomfort. They had been to enough grand houses for Morgan to be used to them, but he was still amazed by the riches and wealth on show.

“It really is a rather urgent matter,”

Fletcher said, perhaps a little out of turn. “We are all terribly worried about the young lady.”

A young lady? How peculiar.

Colin was surprised, for young ladies do not just vanish. There had to be more to this story than they had heard so far.

“Have no fear!” Morgan said, his chest puffed out and his voice booming, almost comically. Colin rolled his eyes at him. “For we shall rescue the maiden from harm and return her to her noble home.”

Fletcher raised an eyebrow in surprise,

then opened the door to the Duke's study.

“Misters Baker and Hunt, Your Grace,” he said with a bow.

“Ah, gentlemen, please come in. I have a rather urgent matter to discuss with you.”

They entered the room, both taking a seat in front of the Duke's desk. Fletcher bowed again, then closed the door behind him.

“Now, before we continue,” the Duke said as he returned to his seat. “I must stress upon you the importance of secrecy in this matter.”

“You can count on us,” Morgan said, while Colin decided on the more polite “Of course, Your Grace.”

“Because if news of this gets out, my daughter, my beautiful Julianna, she will be ruined and then . . .” He groaned and rubbed a hand across his forehead. He looked

exhausted, his eyes ringed in red.

“Fret not, Your Grace,” Morgan said. “We understand the importance of secrecy. If we could only tell you the things we knew . . .”

Colin slapped him on the arm, warning him to regain his professionalism. Morgan cleared his throat and sat up straighter.

“Here is the issue,” the Duke said. He clasped his hands together on the table, looking down as he considered the best words

to use. “My daughter, Lady Julianna Campbell, she has . . . well, let us say she has run away.”

“May I ask why, Your Grace?” Colin asked, suddenly intrigued.

“Is that really important?” the Duke asked, looking sharply at him.

“It . . .” Colin thought quickly. “Knowing her motives may help us understand where she may have gone,” he said.

“Very well.” The Duke returned his gaze to his hands on the desk as he spoke. “I had arranged a marriage for her. She is one-and-twenty,” he said, looking up as though justifying his decision.

“And she did not approve of your selection?” Morgan asked, suddenly serious.

“No, she did not,” he replied sadly. “And the following morning, when her mother went to wake her, she was gone.”

“Any note? Some sort of indication where she might have gone?” Colin asked.

“She left this.” The Duke handed over the letter Julianna had left. “Not that it tells you much.”

“Anything else?” Morgan asked.

“She left with her maid, Susan Smith.”

“Do you know where Susan is from?”

Where her family lives?”

“She has no family, as far as I am aware,” the Duke said. “Her parents died when she was ten years old, and she was on the streets until she was thirteen.”

Colin felt a stab then, a reminder of the life he had lost, the parents he had loved, but he cleared his throat and put the memories out of mind.

“Well that is not much help,” Morgan

said, thinking. “What does she look like, your daughter?”

“Here is a portrait,” he said, handing over a small painting. “You can keep that one while you search for her, but there is a large one in the library, should you wish to look at it.”

“Yes,” Morgan said, “that would be helpful.”

Colin held onto the painting for a long

while, admiring the beauty of the girl it displayed. Her hair, so red and fiery, seemed to move within the image. Her eyes, too, so pale and green and full of life, pierced his soul.

He shook his head, looking away, and handed the portrait to Morgan. He had never been so mesmerized before —not by a likeness and not by a person either. Yet there was something about this young lady, something that made him want to reach out to her, to rescue her from any ills.

They took a quick look at the larger portrait in the library, then mounted their horses and rode away. Just half a mile away, they stopped to rest, pulling sandwiches from their packs and sitting on the grass, while their horses milled around nibbling at the ground.

“So,” Morgan said, sandwich in hand, although he was yet to take a bite. “What do you think?”

Colin swallowed down the bit of cheese,
then he answered.

“Well I certainly do not blame her for
running away.”

“Really?” Morgan asked, surprised. “But
her father seemed to care for her very much.
And an arranged marriage is not so unusual.”

“No,” Colin admitted. “But I know of the
ton’s duplicity. It disgusts me. They thrive on
people’s suffering. Gossip is a commodity to

these people, a currency they can use to buy favors and the like. Really, the Duke is quite correct in wanting to keep this a secret, or otherwise the young lady's life could be ruined."

Morgan laughed, then pulled a bit of bread from his sandwich and threw it at Colin. It hit him square on the forehead, and Colin looked at him with amused resignation.

"You should know, *my Lord*," he teased, and Colin rolled his eyes. "Were you not, once

upon a time, surrounded by these hyenas? I am sorry—I meant ladies and gentlemen?”

His voice was deep with his mocking and Colin laughed, but still threw his coat at him.

“Enough of that nonsense,” he said with a laugh on his lips. “My former location was not my fault, only where I am now. I remember someone once telling me that one cannot change his past, only shape his future.”

“Really?” Morgan asked in mock

surprise. “Well, he sounds pretty smart, if you
ask me.”

A Message from Leah Conolly

Another story has reached its end. Here's
to many more to come!

Thank you so much for reading my novel.
You are the reason I am able to write the
stories I love so I sincerely hope you liked it!

That being said, I can't wait to hear what
you thought of my heroes and their romance
so I would really appreciate it if you take the
time to post a review, or even contact me via
my website and email address! I will be very
happy to talk to you and receive your

feedback because it will really help me
improve as an author.

So leave your review and help me write
your next favorite page-turner!

Until next time, my wonderful reader!



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